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**We Band of Brothers**

by [DogwoodsAndBluebells](http://archiveofourown.org/users/DogwoodsAndBluebells)

**Summary**

There was potential there, the glimpse of a thought that these extremely independent, highly dangerous individuals could become so much more than just a team – that they could become a family. They just had to survive each other first. Rated for language.

**Notes**
This is the second incarnation of this particular story, the first having been scrapped after the release of Iron Man 3 and the vehement insistence of my beta, a pox upon her for it. It picks up right after the events of that film, but does not reference any leaked information from Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., Thor: The Dark World, or Captain America: The Winter Soldier. Additionally, none of my other works are prerequisites necessary for understanding or enjoying this piece, although it takes place in the same general universe and there will be allusions to previously published stories of mine. Please enjoy.
"You must remember, family is often born of blood, but it doesn't depend on blood. Nor is it exclusive of friendship. Family members can be your best friends, you know. And best friends, whether or not they are related to you, can be your family."

― Trenton Lee Stewart, The Mysterious Benedict Society

"The most important thing in life is your family. There are days you love them, and others you don’t, but in the end they're the people you always come home to. Sometimes it's the family you're born into, and sometimes it's the one you make for yourself."

― Candice Bergen, Sex and the City

The mess on the helicarrier was slowly filling with new recruits and battered veterans as the evening wore on, the tables occupied with an odd conglomerate of young and old in the days before Christmas. A table in the corner, however, remained conspicuously empty, save for one, lone occupant. Captain Steve Rogers sipped calmly at his soup as a group of green agents lingered in his blind spot, whispering. His stare at the opposite wall remained blankly unwavering as his grip on the spoon tightened in response to what was occurring behind him. Maria Hill sighed to herself as she watched the tableau unfold in a similar manner for the third time that week.

It had been nearly two months since Clint Barton and Natasha Romanoff had amicably parted ways with SHIELD, retreating to the Barton family ranch in Oklahoma, and Captain Rogers had been mostly alone in the interim weeks. One of the new agents whispered softly in another's ear and Maria saw the Captain's shoulders tense at whatever they'd thought out of his range of hearing. Squaring her shoulders, she moved to join him at his table, sending her coldest glare in the direction of the loiterers.

"You look like you could use some company," she offered lightly as the young recruits quickly scattered. The Captain glanced up at her, one side of his mouth quirking in a half smile.

"Company, or a rescue?" he asked with mild amusement. Maria shrugged, taking his reply as an invitation and sliding into the seat across from him.

"Whichever you prefer." She could feel the gazes of the other agents in the mess, cataloging their every movement as they watched the novel scene unfold. The Captain seemed unaffected by the scrutiny that had her on edge, and she forced herself to relax as she continued. "Honestly, you look like you needed a friend today."

He hesitated for a split second and then gently set his spoon down. "What makes you say that?"
"I'm observant," she informed him, ripping a piece from her chicken salad sandwich and popping it into her mouth. "You've sat alone for weeks now, seemingly ignoring everyone around you, but today, the recruits look to be getting through that silent wall and bothering you. That's not normal."

He rubbed a hand across his brow as she tore off another bite. "Bucky always said I was awful at poker," he muttered to himself, oblivious to the questioning glance she gave him. He watched her for a moment with tired eyes, and she tried not to flinch under the quiet inspection. Suddenly, his gaze zeroed in on her sandwich. "That's portable, right?"

She made a show of inspecting it, trying to lend some levity to the situation. "Last I checked, yes."

Her ploy seemed to work, based on the slight tightening of the corners of his mouth. Twitching his head to the side, he pushed back from the table and headed towards the exit. Picking up the rest of her meal and her drink, Maria quickly followed him, resisting the urge to wave at the nosy occupants of the mess.

She trailed him through the winding corridors of the repaired, docked helicarrier, her interest piquing when he snagged two coats from a rack and popped a hatch, climbing through to the bow that bobbed with motions of the harbor. The Virginia air was chilly in the evening, winter settling in for the long haul, and Maria gratefully accepted the warm jacket he offered her. He slipped the remaining coat over his broad shoulders and some of the tension in his face eased.

"Not a fan of the cold?" His resultant smile was slightly brittle and Maria wanted to hit herself.

"Not particularly, no," he replied, turning to face the open ocean and allow her a moment to curse her lack of a brain–mouth filter. "But, Bruce and I once talked about acclimating, after New York, and I can't let something like unease with the cold to affect my performance in any way."

"So you sit in the night air and stare at the ocean," she finished for him, polishing off her dinner and drink, moving to stand at his side. He nodded, still contemplating the Atlantic even as she studied him. After a moment of silence, she realized what she was seeing in his expression and murmured, "You miss them."

"Yes," he replied candidly, in a move that surprised her. "They weren't really my team, but they were a team."

"But that's not all," she murmured to herself. She searched his face for a moment, trying to see past what he was letting her see. "What's really bothering you?"

He blinked owlishly at her, somewhat caught off guard by her insight, and she bit back on the urge to point at herself and reiterate, "Observant." Clasping his hands in front of himself, he leaned forward onto the railing, propping one booted foot on the bottom pipe, and sighed. "Stark."

Maria couldn't help snorting a laugh as she relaxed into a similar position beside him. "Stark bothers everyone," she told him with a smirk. "It's his purpose in life."

The quip earned her a laugh, but the smile soon melted from his face. "He never called." He flicked his eyes at her, judging her comprehension. "I thought he'd call."

And everything suddenly made perfect sense. "With the Mandarin."

"Yeah." He picked at the fraying cuff of the jacket as the wind picked up a little. "Director Fury flat out told me that I wasn't allowed to go."

"I bet there was more to it than that," she muttered beneath her breath, rubbing her hands along her
arms for warmth.

He grinned hollowly. "You could say that."

…

"He doesn't want your help!"

The exclamation echoed loudly in the office and Steve nearly took a step back in the face of its vehemence. Instead, he felt his gaze narrow dangerously and a bit of the Old Steve, the Steve that was used to battle and command and his own time period, emerge.

"I beg your pardon?"

Fury leaned forward, propping his fists on the desk. "He doesn't want your help, Captain. He hasn't called for you. He isn't making another damned declaration on national television. He doesn't want you, because Stark, by his own admission, is not a team player."

Steve mulled Fury's words over for a moment, more stung by the insinuation of Tony's disregard than he cared to admit to the director. Finally reaching a decision, he shook his head. "I still want to go. And if it can't be a SHIELD sanctioned mission for whatever reasons, then I'd like to request leave."

"Denied."

The reply was lightning fast and whipcrack sharp and horribly jarring. Steve felt his muscles tense, battle ready. "May I ask why?"

"As I said when this all started up, we are not pursuing the Mandarin. The federal government has that covered. And, we need you here," Fury replied calmly.

"For?"

"It's classified at the moment," Fury said dismissively.

Had Bucky been there, he would have seen the set of Steve's face and warned Fury that the older man was taking a terrible mistake. But Bucky wasn't there and Fury remained oblivious. "If that's all, Captain Rogers."

Steve crossed his arms and planted his feet. "It's not."

"Then you misunderstood me," Fury said delicately, fixing his eye on Steve. "That is all."

Chafing at the dismissal, Steve stalked down the hallways to his bunk and immediately pulled out his cellphone. The gadget was still disgustingly modern, all sleek lines and fragile glass, but Hill and Clint had spent a few weeks patiently teaching him how to work the small machine.

Natasha answered the phone after six rings, sounding breathless, and Steve hesitated. "I didn't interrupt anything, did I?"

She laughed aloud at him. "If we'd been having sex, I wouldn't have bothered to answer the phone," she assured him and Steve felt his cheeks flame. "I was just training. What's on your mind?"

"I know that you don't have internet access or television, but have you heard anything about the Mandarin and Stark?"
He heard her shift on the other end of the line. "No."

Steve gave a quick summary of events and then paused. "Director Fury said that I wasn't allowed to go help."

"Is that all he said?"

Steve rolled his eyes at the careful tone of her voice. "He said that Stark hadn't called me, and that meant he didn't want my help."

"He probably doesn't," she interjected gently.

"And then, when I asked for leave to go anyway," Steve continued, glossing over her objections. "He told me no."

She huffed, sounding exasperated. "Steve, if Fury doesn't want you to go, then there's a good reason."

"So you're saying that I should obey SHIELD and ignore the fact that one of my teammates is out there, battling this guy, who always seems to be one step ahead of everyone else, alone."

"I'm saying that you were given an order for a reason," she corrected. "You might not like it, but it's an order."

Steve bit back on a sigh, knowing that Natasha would take the gesture the wrong way. "Alright," he murmured. "Say hi to Clint for me."

"When he regains consciousness," she promised, and disconnected the call.

..."So that's why you're all out of sorts," Maria mused, sniffling lightly in the cold air. He shrugged.

"I trust Natasha's judgment, but that doesn't mean I'm okay with leaving Stark out in the cold." He smiled lightly at her. "So to speak."

She chuckled. "I think that Stark is alright on his own, for the most part."

"That's not what I heard in regards to the palladium poisoning." Maria stared at him, one brow raised in silent question. He made a helpless gesture with his hands. "Nat can be very informative when she chooses to be."

She eyed him for a moment as he continued to pick at the cuff of his borrowed jacket. "Does it bother you that Stark hasn't called SHIELD? Or that he hasn't called you?"

"I can't say that I'm not offended," he hedged after a long silence. "In fact, I think I'm very offended that Stark hasn't asked for help."

He turned to face her for the first time in long minutes and found her gaze sympathetic. One pale hand hovered uncertainly in the air, ultimately returning to her side as she decided that it wasn't her place to offer comfort. He looked back over the ocean when she didn't say anything, choosing to mull over the situation rather than ask her what she was thinking.

"Steve." It was the first time she'd ever used his given name, and that alone was enough to arrest his attention. The hesitant tone and her nervous gestures gave him further pause. "You know that this isn't about you, right?"
"I'm not that self-centered," he protested, looking rather wounded.

"That's not what I meant," she said immediately and sighed, hopping lightly from foot to foot in the cold. "I'm probably not supposed to tell you this, but it's been bothering me for months and I think that you might be able to do something about it."

He leaned closer. "What happened?"

"After New York, Stark came to us and said that he wanted out of the Avengers." Steve looked stricken at the information and she hurried to explain. "He said that he'd come because of Phil, and now that Phil was gone, there was no reason for him to stay. Fury accepted that, and then did the one that that was most ill-advised."

Steve's attention was completely riveted. "Which was?"

Her smirk was brittle. "Ask him to hand over the Iron Man suit."

"Oh." His face cleared as the full weight of what she'd said hit, and she watched his expression cycle through a number of emotions. Finally, he looked curiously at her for a moment. "Is that why things have been strained between you and Director Fury lately?"

Maria laughed lightly. "Things are always strained between us, Captain Rogers. That just added fuel to the fire."

He nodded in acceptance, his mind clearly elsewhere. "Thank you, Agent Hill. I think I know what to do now."

"Here."

Director Fury looked up slowly, his eyebrow raised.

"What is this, Captain?"

Steve's face was implacably cold and he felt slightly triumphant at the careful shifting of Fury's expression in response. The director leaned back and laced his fingers together, setting his clasped hands on his desk as he waited for Steve's answer.

"This," Steve said, pushing the piece of paper forward. "Is my resignation."

The silence that followed was deafening. "Your what?"

"I am resigning my position with SHIELD, effective immediately," Steve replied. Fury was remarkably calm, though Steve could see a vein beginning to twitch in the director's neck.

"May I ask why?"

Steve nodded, resisting the urge to smirk. He fleetingly thought that he'd spent far too much time with the assassins if that was his first response. Returning his attention to the matter at hand, he answered, "You can."

Fury's eyes narrowed when Steve said nothing else and he sighed. "I don't suppose there's anything I can say to convince you to stay."

Steve leaned down and hefted his old Army trunk onto his shoulder and turned, not looking back as he answered. "No."
He was almost to the deck when Maria caught up with him and he was shaking his head before she could say a word. "I'm not staying."

"I would never ask you to," she retorted immediately, skidding to a halt beside his motorcycle. "I assume you're going to get Clint and Natasha?"

"Yes," he murmured, strapping his trunk to the back.

She held out a few pieces of paper, the cellphone he'd purposefully left, and a folded map. "I mapped out the fastest route to Clint's ranch and put the address into your phone's GPS. It's also marked on the map, if you still prefer the old way, but I took the tracker out of your cell and changed the number, in case you were worried about being followed."

"Won't SHIELD know where I'm going anyway?" He sounded slightly derisive, but accepted the proffered items all the same. "Bruce said they tracked him all over the globe."

"We did," she admitted. "But Clint was careful to keep this place off of anyone's radar. I think the only ones who knew about it were the two of them and Phil. The only reason I know is because Natasha gave me the address before they left. Just in case."

Steve felt his lips twitch upwards and held the packet of paper up. "And this?"

"Your bike gets roughly twenty four miles to the gallon on a highway setting and you need to eat more than a normal human." She pointed to the sheaf. "That's every gas station and restaurant along your route. And this," she continued, extending her hand. "Is cash, to get you going."

Steve stepped back, shaking his head. "I can't take your money, Agent Hill."

"I know you're good for it," she informed him, tucking the bills away in one of his bags. "And it's Maria, sir." She smiled, the slight sadness of the expression lost on an oblivious Steve. "You don't work here anymore."

"Thank you, Maria," he said, his tone genuine as he slid the papers into his inner jacket pocket. "For everything."

"It's the least that I can do." She crossed her arms against the wind and shifted her gaze away from him. "Phil was one of my best friends, and Tony Stark was one of his. I think this is what Phil would do, if he were here. And so that's what I'm going to do."

"Are you going to get into trouble?"

She snorted. "I'm always in trouble with Director Fury," she informed him wryly. "And, if it gets unbearable, I'll just take a page out of your book." She gestured to his packed belongings.

He chuckled lightly and mounted his motorcycle. "I'll let you know how it works out for me."

"Be careful." He glanced up at her serious entreaty. "It's a whole new world out there, Captain, and you haven't seen all that much of it yet."

"I will," he promised sincerely, leaning forward with a smirk. "And it's Steve, Maria."

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The knocking at the door rang loudly through the old house, and the pair of assassins stared blankly at each other for a moment. In a single movement, they unholstered Glock handguns and crept down the rickety stairs. At Clint's nod, Natasha swung the door open and both weapons were pointed at
"I hope this isn't how you greet all of your guests," he quipped, pointedly raising his brows at them. "Can I come in?"

"Sure," Clint said easily, flicking the safety latch on his gun and slipping it into the waistband of his jeans. "What's going on?"

Steve stepped inside the door and set his luggage on the foyer floor. "I left SHIELD."

"What?"

Their response would have been comical in any other situation, but Steve was too tired and too stressed to find any humor in their dumbfounded faces. Sighing, he motioned them into the sitting area to their left and began to explain everything, from the recent issues with the Mandarin to the real reason behind Tony's sudden decision to become a hermit.

Natasha was visibly outraged after finding out Fury's request of Tony, going so far as to stand and pace. Steve looked up at her, following her movements.

"His refusal to debrief makes much more sense now," Clint muttered, eyeing his partner's angry steps. "I had wondered why Banner had seemed so adamant that we not bother him about it."

"What was he thinking?" Natasha suddenly hissed. "Fury may as well have asked Tony to slice out a lung and hand it over. That suit is just as much a part of the man as an organ."

"I take that means that your relationship with SHIELD has just gone from amicable to bitter," Steve muttered.

"Ignoring that," Clint began, shooting Natasha a look at her soft growl. "The Mandarin is dead now, from what the last report you saw said, and that battle is over. So what do we do now?"

Steve fixed him with blazing eyes. "We regroup."

"Do you really think that's a good idea?" Clint asked softly, clasping his hands and leaning forward slightly. "That might be what we do, but the others –."

"Are not soldiers," Steve finished for him with wry understanding. "I know that. But they've been through hell with us, and that's got to count for something."

Natasha slipped back into Clint's line of vision, catching his attention. They were silent for a long time, shifting to face each other and holding a wordless conversation that had become infamous and commonplace. Finally, Clint nodded and Natasha smiled slightly.

"We'll tell Banner," she offered. "I think he's still at Stark Tower in New York. That'll leave you with Tony and Pepper."

Steve snorted. "Do you think he's more likely to listen to me?"

"Pepper is," she retorted. "And Tony is less likely to outright refuse you than me."

Clint barked a laugh and Steve capitulated with a tilt of his head.

"We should move soon," Natasha said after a moment, shifting on her feet. "If you're right about the Malibu house being gone, he'll relocate to the Tower as soon as he can."
"Agreed," Clint said. "We should get going."

"Alright." Steve stood, crossing his arms. "It's late enough that you can pack your essentials and get some rest. Leave at first light for New York."

Clint cocked his head at Steve. "And you?"

"If Nat's right about Stark relocating, and I think that she is," he answered with a smile. "Then I need to get there as soon as I can."

"Miss Potts." Pepper glanced up from the day's newspaper on her desk, sliding it into the box of her belongings. Her receptionist stood awkwardly in the doorway. "There's a rather, well, broad man here to see you. I told him that you weren't taking visitors, but he was most insistent, and with Mister Hogan still out," she trailed off leadingly.

Pepper smiled reassuringly, wishing for the heat to rise beneath her skin. Tony was busy with Happy in the hospital and sending every bit of science equipment he could find to Rose Hill, Tennessee, but he'd managed to finalize and administer a cure for Extremis in the meantime, which meant that she was disturbingly vulnerable. "Did he give a name?"

"Captain Steve Rogers."

"Oh thank God," she breathed, her body relaxing with relief. "Let him in."

Pepper knew that she was confusing her poor secretary with her sudden mood change, but Captain America stepping through her door was a welcomed sight after the events of the last few days. Walking to greet him, her feet carried her completely past the standard personal space bubble of three feet and enveloped the taller man in a hug. He flailed awkwardly for a moment, hesitantly returning her embrace. "I'm so glad you're here. Where the hell have you been?"

Backing out of the hold, she was surprised to see his face stern. "I was informed that my help was neither wanted nor needed. By the time I realized otherwise, the situation had been resolved."

She leaned back, tilting her head up to look him in the eyes. "Then you came because?"

"I'd like to know how Stark is doing." Something about his tone made her think that asking about Tony wasn't the only thing on his agenda. Finally stepping away, she sighed lightly, giving him a smile at his curious glance.

Pepper motioned him into one of the chairs in front of her desk and took her time reclaiming her seat, thinking through what exactly to tell him. "Tony is fine. Having some trouble sleeping, still, but nothing he can't overcome with a little work in the lab."

Steve nodded quietly, focusing his gaze on his clasped hands. "Do you think he'd be open to getting back together with the team?"

"Why?" Pepper asked, suddenly wary.

Steve sighed, rubbing a hand across his brow. When he finally met her gaze, he looked far wearier than she'd expected. "To heal."

She sat back in her chair, somewhat stunned, and remained silent for a long time. Finally leaning forward, she imitated Steve's posture. "He won't go quietly, you know."
"I'd never assume that of him," he replied with a blinding grin. "But I think it'll help. Everyone."

"Are you here alone?" she asked rather suddenly, remembering that there had been six of them that day in Midtown.

"Yes," he answered, his shoulder relaxing slightly. "I sent Clint and Natasha to tell Doctor Banner, so they're on their way to New York."

She smiled lightly. "As are we."

"That's what Nat figured." She raised a brow at his casual nickname for the Black Widow. He shifted in the small chair, offering her a grin. "We headed out as soon as we could."

"Well, there are a few more tasks that we have to do to close things out here, but I think that we should be able to join you soon." She smiled entreatingly at him. "Think you can help out with that?"

"What do you need me to do?" he asked immediately, to her relief.

Pepper reached out a hand for the box she'd been filling and rooted through it for a moment. Steve watched curiously as she pulled a picture from the depths and pried it from the frame. Sliding it in front of him, she picked up a silver pen and wrote a few lines on the pad of paper at her elbow.

"This is the address of the," she paused, taking a moment to compose herself as she ripped the page from the pad. "Of where the house used to be. If you can find the pieces of these robots," she continued, indicating Dum-E and You in the background of the image. "I would really appreciate it."

"Of course," he murmured. Reaching out a hand, he lifted his eyes in question. "May I take this with me?"

"Sure," she replied, leaning back in her chair. "I'll send someone to pick up whatever you find in an hour or so."

Recognizing the subtle, polite dismissal, Steve stood immediately, grasping the corners of the photograph and nodded goodbye. Pepper watched him leave, with a thoughtful expression. Picking up her phone after a moment, she unlocked the screen and dialed a number, a grin growing on her face.

"Bruce? It's Pepper."

"Hi, Pepper," Bruce greeted. "Was there something that you needed?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact," she replied, her free hand toying with the silver pen. "I was cleaning out my office and a thought just occurred to me. Are you still interested in the original super soldier serum?"

The Audi slowed to a stop near the edge of the cliff and Tony took a moment to look around at what had, only a few days ago, been his home. He hadn't planned on returning, but Bruce had called and requested that he bring Howard's old trunk with him, prattling on about the original serum and his father's notes and Tony found himself agreeing to cart the trunk from coast to coast.

Heaving a sigh, he stepped out of his car into what used to be the foyer, the weight of his freshly separated arc reactor heavy in his pocket. He'd brought it on a whim, thinking that he'd let Pepper talk him into watching one too many dramas that involved outrageously well–defined male leads performing touching scenes.
Like throwing meaningful bits of tech symbolically into the ocean.

Rolling his eyes at himself and stepping towards the ocean, he looked over the edge and nearly plummeted in his shock.

The chaos that he'd anticipated to find his lab in was notably absent, organized into distinct piles, and a very unexpected Captain America was in his shirtsleeves, sorting through the debris. Tony watched with abject fascination as Steve shifted the remains of a worktable with one hand and reached down, his other emerging with the Mark I arc reactor Pepper had insisted on keeping, still attached to the new stand.

The captain rubbed a thumb over the small plaque on the base, his lips kicking up in a half smile as he read it. Dropping the flat of the table, he rose to his feet and set the arc reactor in a pile of twisted metal that looked terribly familiar. Tony shifted to get a better view and his shoe knocked a few small bits of rubble down the side of the cliff. Steve looked up immediately, his muscles tensing in defense. The two men simply stared at one another for a long moment, and then Steve relaxed, running a hand through his mussed hair.

"What the hell were you thinking?"

Tony flatly ignored the question. "What are you doing here?"

"I went to see Miss Potts and she asked me to salvage what I could of your robots," Steve replied, dusting his hands off ineffectually. Tony picked his way down the side of the cliff to where the lab used to be and Steve pulled a folded picture from his back pocket, holding it out for the billionaire's examination. He glanced back at the mangled heap of metal and muttered, "I think this is it."

Tony inspected what Steve had gathered so far, his eyes immediately separating the pieces of Dum-E and You. He swept the area, finding the missing large parts. Nodding at the last few bits, he directed Steve. "Think you can collect those and move everything up top?"

"Sure," the soldier replied, already in motion.

Tony observed him lightly for a moment, shaking his head at himself and moving to the manual override for the underground storage area. Maneuvering carefully down the stairs, he found what Bruce had sent him for and hefted it onto his shoulder.

Steve had loaded the trailer by the time he made it back to the car. Shoving Dum-E's base with one foot to make room, he dropped his father's trunk onto the trailer with a loud thud. Steve eyed it curiously for a moment, his face shifting into an indiscernible expression as he read the name painted on the top.

To Tony's slight surprise, Steve remained silent on the subject and finished securing the items in the trailer. Walking over to the motorcycle Tony hadn't noticed, he paused.

"We're, uh," Steve began. "We're getting the team back together."

Tony raised an eyebrow in the soldier's direction. "Who's we?"

"Well, everyone except you, really," he muttered, offering Tony a sheepish smile.

The billionaire snorted, crossing his arms and leaning back against the car. "Well, let me know how that goes, yeah?"

Steve hesitated, just for a second, before nodding. "I will."
Tony got into his car, offering a small wave as Steve mounted his bike and rode out onto the road. He pulled out behind the soldier and followed a circuitous path that deposited him back at his front door. Ensured that he was alone, Tony stepped out of the Audi again and slipped a hand into his pocket.

The arc reactor gleamed brightly in the sunlight, and, after a moment's contemplation, he tossed it into the ocean. Sliding back into the driver's seat, he headed for his hotel to wait for a few days of solitude.

It took longer than Tony had expected for Happy to awake from his medically induced coma and be of sound enough mind to communicate, but he was finally able to board the plane to New York. He chafed at the length of time it took to arrive at the Tower, having forgotten what New York traffic was like, and was thoroughly relieved to see the building standing tall in the heart of Midtown's rebuilding efforts.

The ride up the elevator was longer than he remembered and blissfully quiet in the wake of the dozens of photographers that had camped outside the lobby. Stepping out of the lift, he dropped his bag and stopped short.

Clint Barton was sitting rather comfortably on his couch, bare feet propped on the coffee table and one hand over the back of the sofa as the other flipped aimlessly through television channels. Bruce was outside on the balcony on the phone, huddled under a coat against the cold, and Steve was pouring Pepper a drink in the kitchen. Natasha popped up from behind the bar with a bottle of wine and Tony had had enough.

"What the hell is this?"

Pepper glanced over at him and smiled, and then, in a move that shocked him more than finding the Avengers in his Tower, directed her attention to Steve in blatant deference to his authority. The soldier handed her the glass of water and placed both hands on the counter.

"I told you," he said slowly. "We were getting the team together again."

"Yes, but I didn't think that meant in my living room," Tony sniped, stepping into the lounge proper.

Pepper turned on her stool. "They didn't have anywhere else to go, so I invited them to stay here."

"What about the SHIELD safehouses?" Tony raised an eyebrow accusingly at the assassins. "I'm sure there's plenty that survived everything."

"There are," Clint agreed. "But, as we no longer work for SHIELD, we do not have access to any of them."

Tony was stymied. "What?"

Bruce finally noticed Tony's arrival and poked his head in from the patio. "Are you explaining how none of you work for SHIELD anymore?" he asked, directing his question at Steve.

"We're getting there," the soldier answered and Bruce nodded, returning to the conversation he was having.

Natasha took pity on Tony's bewildered expression and set the bottle of wine on the table next to Pepper. "Clint and I left in October, once it was clear that we couldn't stay there with the memories or with the bulk of the veteran agents in a constant state of distrust." She jerked her head towards the
kitchen, folding her arms across her chest. "Steve left when he found out what you and Fury argued over after New York, which was about a week ago."

"And this series of unfortunate events leads you to me how?"

Pepper finally stood, walking over to him with a stubborn look on her face that he knew well. "Because you're a part of the team, whether you believe it or not," she murmured softly in his ear.

"Still not a team player, Pep," he whispered back.

"But you can be, if you try," she countered.

He flicked his eyes over her shoulder to where the others were. Bruce remained occupied on the balcony and Steve was still in the kitchen, actively trying not to listen to their conversation. Natasha was looking extremely bored, picking at the foil around the top of the wine bottle, and Clint was unashamedly watching their interaction.

Ignoring the others, Tony drew Pepper back towards the elevator, out of anyone's line of sight, and looked her seriously in the eyes. "I'm not sure I'm ready for this."

"I think it's something that you need, whether you're ready for it or not," she informed him, running her hands along the lapels of his coat. "And I think that I need it too. Do it for me?"

"That is so completely cheating," he complained, leaning back against the wall and pulling her towards him by her thin belt. "And I resent that you're guilting me into this. I had enough of that from the kid."

She grinned at him. "But it didn't work for Harley, and it will for me."

"Overconfident," he informed her. Her smile widened.

"I learned from the best."

"Overconfident cheating flatterer," he amended. "What do I get out of the deal?"

"Sex," she replied immediately. "And I let you start making a Mark Forty–Three suit six months sooner than I'd originally planned."

He pretended to mull things for a moment. "I'm fine with the sex, I think."

"You'd better be," she muttered, slipping her arms around his waist and leaning in to his body heat.

He dropped a kiss on the top of her head and watched her contemplatively. "What was your original timeline?"

"In a year."

"Brutal."

He felt her smile against his chest. "I learned that from the best, too."

Pepper had known him long enough to know when to press and when to wait, and so they stood wordlessly in the entry for a few minutes.

"Alright," he finally sighed. "We give this a trial run. For you."
Despite the close quarters and the fact that the Tower had not been designed for a large number of guests, things ran relatively smoothly for the next few days. The assassins kept mostly to themselves, only appearing to raid the kitchen or browse the cable lineup. Bruce happily holed himself up in the lab with Howard Stark's notes. Steve was a silent presence in the Tower, when he wasn't at a gym, and Tony was itching to build anything, chafing under Pepper's restrictions.

It was a relief when Steve called everyone into the lounge one night and announced that Agent Phil Coulson was receiving a posthumous medal for valor and service, and that they were requested to attend.

"Requested or commanded?" Tony questioned beneath his breath and yelped aloud when Pepper slammed her fist into his bicep. "That hurt!"

"Good," she retorted as the others looked on with mild amusement. "You're going."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "Not if Fury ordered it."

"It's an actual invitation," Steve intervened, holding the cream colored card out for Tony's perusal. "Not a summons, as if that would matter to you, anyway."

"See? He gets it," Tony groused, leaning back into the sofa and eyeing the invitation with mistrust as he ignored Pepper's glare. It took him a moment to realize that everyone's attention was on him. "What?"

"Are you coming with us, or not?" Bruce asked softly, shooting an uneasy glance at the subdued assassins behind the bar.

"He's going," Pepper replied flatly.

Tony raised his eyebrow at her. "Could you let me answer? I think he was talking to me."

"Is your answer going to be different?" She crossed her arms, looking as menacing as she was able.

He frowned, sinking back into the couch cushions. "No."

"Then there's not an issue, is there?" She smiled victoriously.

"There wasn't an issue to begin with," Tony muttered to himself. "When is this thing?"

Steve glanced back down at the invitation. "In a week. There will be a small ceremony at the cemetery and then a reception afterwards."

"Sounds fun," the billionaire murmured in response as he stood. "I'm going to the lab."

After a moment's hesitation, Bruce followed him downstairs and Pepper watched them go with an indiscernible expression. Steve looked at her curiously as Natasha slipped out of sight. "I thought he wasn't allowed in the labs."

"There's no point in stopping him at the moment," she answered softly, acutely aware that Clint was quietly listening to their conversation. "He's upset, and tinkering with something, even if it's just the software in his cellphone, will help."

"Help him how?"

Pepper sighed, shifting so that she was leaning closer to Steve. "He misses Phil, even if he won't admit it to anyone. Even himself. The lab will distract him just enough to allow him to cope."
"Cope, or ignore?" Pepper glanced at Steve, who held out his hands in a gesture of peace. "I'm just asking. Coping is meaningful. Ignoring will just lead to problems later on."

There was a soft metallic clang and Steve cursed quietly. She raised a brow at him questioningly. "Something wrong?"

Steve let out a long groan, rubbing the palm of his hand down his face. "I had hoped that leaving SHIELD would help Clint. That Natasha would force him to grieve properly in a place that didn't remind them of Phil at every turn. Judging from the fact that Clint has just retreated to the ventilation system, I'm guessing things didn't quite go according to plan."

"Ah." She flicked her gaze towards the ceiling. "I think I understand."

"Yeah?" He looked slightly hopeful.

Pepper nodded, giving him a small smile. "Maybe they'll be good for each other."

"Or they'll come to blows," he put in wryly.

Pepper sighed. "Let's hope not."

Backing away from Steve and Pepper's conversation in the kitchen, Natasha stole quietly down to the labs, peering through the overtly modern glass walls in search of her quarry. He wasn't particularly hard to find, working feverishly on what looked to be a set of implantable commlinks, and completely ignorant of her approach.

She eyed the keypad and, on a whim, entered the code she'd been given as Natalie Rushmann and was oddly surprised when it opened the door. Ducking inside, she quietly made her way to the desk and patiently waited for Tony to notice her. It took him less time than she'd thought it would, a talent of self-preservation she was glad to see he finally acquired.

"Shit!"

Her lips didn't move, but she knew that he could see the smile in her eyes. "And here I was, thinking that I was losing my touch," she commented softly as he tried to calm himself, fiddling with the tools on his desk. "I've only been here fifteen minutes."

He glared at her, his hands finally settling. "Did you want something? Other than to give me a heart attack."

"That was my main goal," she admitted. "Did it work?"

"Sadly for you, no. Still here." His eyes narrowed. "Did Pepper send you down here? Is she checking up on me?"

"As you'll recall, I don't work for Miss Potts anymore," she replied lightly, poking one finger through the detritus on his desk. He raised a hand to shove her away, but thought better of it at the glare she sent in his direction. "I was wondering what your plans for the ceremony were."

"What makes you think that I have plans?"

She grinned at that, letting out a staccato laugh. "You're you, Stark, and you've had the knowledge that there was going to be a ceremony for the last twenty minutes. Of course you have plans."

"Oddly enough, Agent Romanoff," Tony began, his voice taut. "I had thought that SHIELD might
be better suited to executing something of this nature."

His words were unexpected and Natasha found herself inexplicably curious. Leaning forward, she met his gaze and scrutinized him. Stark had been as easy for her to read as the majority of men that she met, which was part of why Director Fury had sent her to spy on him in the first place. Her ability to round out racy lingerie hadn't hurt. Cocking her head, she murmured with a sense of wonder, "You want this to be right. For Phil."

He reclined back in his chair, the casualness of the gesture belying his growing discomfort. "Are you going in a particular direction with these thoughts?"

"No," she finally said after a long pause. "No, I don't think I am."

"Good," Tony muttered. "If you don't mind, I have work to be getting to."

He mentally dismissed her, turning his attention back to the small devices littered across his anti-static mat. She watched him work, his fingers delicately tweezing at wires no bigger than a strand of hair, and finally pulled a stool over to sit on. He huffed with impatience and glared at her.

"Why are you still here? Did you not receive my not—at—all subtle hint to get out of my lab?"

"Well, you never specifically said to leave," she hedged and his eyes narrowed further.

"Get out of my lab."

"And I wouldn't listen anyway," she continued, as if he hadn't spoken. "So that doesn't really matter, does it?"

Setting his tools down, he placed his palms flat on the table. "What do you want? Really?"

"You're not the only one that misses him," she murmured softly, taking no pleasure in the look of abject shock he gave her in response. "I know you're not a team player and that you think you don't need us. But, while none of us actually possesses the psychiatry degree that you seem to think Bruce has, that doesn't make us bad listeners."

"I don't need anyone," Tony finally managed to reply, his voice strangled.

She smiled at him, the gesture faintly pitying and mostly sympathetic. "I didn't put everything I saw in that psych profile for Fury, you know."

"If this conversation continues, I'm going to need either scotch or a weapon," he muttered beneath his breath, looking longingly at the drawer she knew held his secret stash of liquor.

"I'll leave," she promised and he perked up hopefully. "But you have to do something for me."

"No stripteases. I'm in a committed relationship."

"Pay attention," she advised, holding up a hand to stave off the vehement argument she knew was coming. "You weren't Phil's only friend, so you're not the only one that's mourning. Don't let your pain hurt someone else."

She hopped off of the stool and Tony suddenly leaned forward. "This isn't like you," he commented, watching her curiously. "And I can't help but wonder why the hell you're doing it."

"It's not for you," she informed him and he barked out a laugh.
"I never thought it was. It would be about Barton, if I had to guess, but I just can't fathom what you think I can do, besides fund him getting blindingly drunk." He held out one hand in question. "So?"

Natasha cocked her head at him, one slim hand on the door handle. "I read people," she reminded him simply, and quietly left the lab.

The reception hall was exceedingly formal and filled to bursting with attendees clad in black suits and mourning dresses. A quiet hush had fallen over the crowd when they'd arrived, and the lack of noise only served to lend an eerie and tense feeling to the gathering. A few brave souls picked at the buffet table that was set out, but mostly simply congregated in quiet groups.

Maria Hill sighed to herself, leaning against one of the doorways leading out of the room, and sipped at her soda. The carbonation tickled at her nose and she grimaced at the sweetness of the drink. Suddenly unable to stand the onerous silence any more, she slipped through the doorway and made her way to the restroom, refuge of women everywhere. Ignoring the overly feminine décor of the little room, Maria went straight for the large stall in the back and locked herself in.

Breathing a sigh of relief, she leaned back against the door. The reception area had become oppressive, too much counterfeit sorrow from too many people that never truly knew Phil. Without consciously thinking about it, she set her glass on the sink and hiked her black dress up, pulling a small flask from the holder taped to the inside of her thigh. Tipping it back, she drank deeply, savoring the warm burn of the rum in her throat.

She took a moment to check her reflection in the small vanity enclosed in the stall, her gaze raking critically over her appearance, achingly aware of just how close she was to tears. Placing the flask beside her soda, she gripped the edges of the counter with shaking hands and tried to pull herself together. The drinks sat innocently in her periphery as she stared at her reflection and she glanced down, biting her lip in contemplation. Before she could think better of the idea, she dumped the contents of the flask into the glass and replaced the empty container in its holder.

Using one finger, she stirred the alcohol into the soda, nodding in satisfaction at the strength. Feeling much more fortified and able to face the crowds, she happily left the bathroom behind. Halfway back to the repressive reception, a shadow danced across her pathway. The movement caught her eye and she peered into one of the side rooms. The setting sun shone brightly through decorative sun catchers, casting mottled colors on the blandly beige carpet.

Clint Barton sat beneath the casement across from the door, his feet propped on a purloined chair. Maria frowned at the sight of him hiding away, and fleetingly thought of what Phil would do for his friend in her situation. The thought of Phil tightened her throat in unexpected misery. She raised her glass for a fortifying drink and, like Phil was standing next to her, the answer appeared.

Stepping into the room, she gave her walk a little sway and stepped firmly onto the floor to announce her presence. Clint didn't raise his head, but the subtle tensing of his muscles told her that he knew she was there.

"Here," she said, delicately holding the drink out to him. Condensation dripped from the bottom and fell to the floor, right in his line of vision. He looked up at her with bloodshot eyes and she held back a wince at the raw grief on his face. "It's not your drink of choice, I know, but I think you need it more than I do."

Clint wiped a hand down his face, rubbing tiredly at his eyes, and stared at the glass for a moment more. "What is it?"
"Rum and Coke," she answered lightly, kindly ignoring the hoarse quality to his voice. She let him stare at the proffered drink for a moment before deciding to prod him. "You need to get in there."

Clint leaned away, his face closing off. "Not really my scene."

"It's practically a funeral reception, Barton," she replied dryly. "That's not really anyone's scene. But you need to get in there and show your face and you know it." She wiggled the glass enticingly, allowing the ice cubes to clink against the sides. "So take yourself some liquid courage and get up off your ass."

Clint almost smiled as he reached a hand up and took the glass from her fingers. He eyed the play of the light on the fluid, raising a brow. "Where'd you get the rum?"

"Hip flask."

He raked his eyes over her figure and the way that her black dress smoothly hugged her curves. For a split second, he looked like himself again. "Where?"

She let herself smirk back at him, turning on her heel and walking out the door.

"You'll never find out."

Clint watched her leave with a sense of slight amusement that quickly faded when the weight of his task settled in. He threw back half of the drink, mildly impressed at the ratio of rum to Coke, and made his way into the main reception area.

Regardless of the fact that Natasha was usually the face in the crowd on a mission and he was holed up in a nest on a rooftop across the way, Clint knew how to work a room. Taking a circuitous path around the crowd, he stopped at a few of the cliques that had form and joined a conversation or two, speaking without really saying anything before moving on. Eventually settling himself in the far corner of the room, he nodded once at Maria's approving smile and proceeded to allow his mind to wander.

Movement in his eye line caught his attention and he desperately tried not to notice Tony's ambling path in his direction. The billionaire gave him a nod as he leaned against the wall to Clint's right. After a few moments of silence that neither seemed to want to break, Tony pulled a flask from his jacket pocket and unscrewed the top, pouring two fingers of a crystal clear liquid into Clint's glass. Clint tipped the drink in his direction and took a sip, mentally grimacing at the taste. Tony was content to sip directly from the flask at intervals, maintaining the quiet bubble that seemed to encapsulate the pair.

Tony had nearly finished stash of his liquor by the time Steve spied them and made a beeline in their direction, away from the small crowd of admirers that seemed to trail him around the room. He murmured a soft greeting at them, trying to look inconspicuous as he relaxed next to Clint. A few fans started to follow the soldier, but twin glares from Tony and Clint seemed to deter them. Tipping the flask upwards, Tony emptied it and peered forlornly into its depths.

"Fuck this," he muttered beneath his breath. Steve and Clint glanced over at him, listening. "There's much more booze at the Tower and far fewer people with IQs in the double digits." Turning to them, he raised his eyebrows. "Coming?"

Clint took a second to eye his glass. "Got anything better than this swill?"

"That is premium Russian vodka," Tony told him sternly. "And of course I do. Be realistic."
"Premium it may be," Clint replied lightly, pushing off of the wall. "But it does not mix well with rum and Coke. I'm driving."

Handing his glass to Steve, he walked purposefully out of the room, pulling his keys from his pants pocket as he went. Tony detoured over to Pepper, whispering in her ear, and slipped out the same door Clint had. Steve sighed, his mind blanking for a few long moments. Finally turning his gaze to the left, he raised an eyebrow at Natasha's sudden appearance.

"Where did Clint go?" she asked quietly, her eyes locked on the exit.

Steve gestured with Clint's discarded glass. "He and Stark left for the Tower, to drink more."

"Hm." She looked strangely pleased at the notion, but ignored Steve's curious glance. "We probably shouldn't leave them alone for too long, but I don't think we should follow just yet."

"Nat, are you carrying out a plan that I don't know about? Again." She grinned widely at him and Steve sighed. "Let's not have any bloodshed with this one, please."

"Oh, they won't hurt each other," she scoffed.

He raised a brow in her direction. "I was talking about you."

She laughed aloud, drawing the attention of half of the room, and leaned back against the wall. Crossing her arms, she glanced up at him. "See? My hands are tied."

"For all the good that is going to do," he muttered beneath his breath, setting off another round of soft giggles. As Natasha quieted, the crowd lost interest in the pair and they were joined by Pepper and Bruce.

Bruce offered them a smile and Pepper looked around, turning to Steve. "Do you know where Tony went?"

"He and Clint went back to the Tower," Steve replied, trailing off at the end and she nodded in understanding.

"To drink," she finished firmly. Turning to Natasha, she stepped closer. "Should we go after them?"

Natasha cocked her head in thought, biting her lip. Grasping Steve's elbow, she pulled his hand from his pocket and checked his watch. "I think we've waited long enough. Any longer and we might be doing damage control."


With a small gesture, she led them through the crowd to the door. Steve gave the room a parting glance, waving goodbye to Maria as he ducked out of the room. He slipped around the front of the car and opened the back door for Pepper, holding his palm out. She raised an eyebrow at him and Natasha laughed.

"Just give him the keys, Pepper," she advised. "He's unfailingly polite, no matter how we try to correct him, and he hates not being the one in control of a car."

"Too many car rides with the infantrymen, I'm afraid," he said with a teasing grin. "If you don't mind, ma'am."

Pepper pursed her lips, but dropped the keys into his hand regardless, smiling in thanks when he
closed the door for her. He slid into the driver's seat and cautiously pulled out into traffic. The car smoothly navigated the streets, somewhat slower than the occupants were used to, and arrived at the Tower without delay.

Clint and Tony were at the bar when they reached the penthouse, picking through the contents. Tony had a glass of something brown in his hand and Clint was drinking directly from a bottle of tequila, which caused Natasha to sigh softly. Stepping behind the bar, she gently took the bottle from his hand and set it on the counter. Clint eyed her for a moment, looking terribly broken, and she simply stared back at him. Shaking his head at himself, Clint reached beneath the bar and began pulling out shot glasses.

With a nod, Bruce drifted towards the sofa, Steve in tow. Pepper watched Clint work for a moment and realized what he was doing, "Tony," she said softly. "I think we're going to need a bottle of vodka."

"Alright," he murmured, glancing curiously to where Natasha was handing out shot glasses to the group. Reaching beneath the counter, he rummaged around before finding what he was looking for. Dusting off a bottle of top shelf Russian vodka, he nodded once at Natasha and uncorked the top.

Clint took it from him with a wordless mumble and began to pour, beginning with the glass that remained on the counter. Bruce watched with mild interest.

"Are we expecting company?"

Clint stubbornly continued doling out shots. "It's for Phil," he muttered.

"I didn't realize you were Irish," Steve murmured, holding out his empty glass. At Bruce's questioning glance, he quietly explained. "It's an old Irish tradition, to pour a shot in memory of the recently departed.

"Clint's Irish when it suits him," Natasha commented softly, sitting delicately on the floor to Bruce's left. "It suits him tonight."

Tony dropped into the chair across from Bruce, scooting just enough to allow Pepper to sit beside him and leaving the other for Clint. Natasha directed her gaze at Clint and the others followed her suit, waiting for Clint to speak.

After a moment, Clint raised his glass in the air. "To Phil," he said simply. "The man who never stopped believing in heroes, and never stopped believing in us."

The group echoed his sentiments with soft, "to Phil's" and fell into silence once more. Steve rose and plucked the bottle from the table, carefully pouring another round of shots. With a wordless gesture, the group swiftly downed the second shot. They were quietly regarding their empty glasses when Pepper spoke and their worlds turned upside down.

To be continued in Chapter Two.
Chapter Two

"You must remember, family is often born of blood, but it doesn't depend on blood. Nor is it exclusive of friendship. Family members can be your best friends, you know. And best friends, whether or not they are related to you, can be your family."

— Trenton Lee Stewart, *The Mysterious Benedict Society*

…

"The most important thing in life is your family. There are days you love them, and others you don't, but in the end they're the people you always come home to. Sometimes it's the family you're born into, and sometimes it's the one you make for yourself."

— Candice Bergen, *Sex and the City*

Chapter Two

"I think we should move in together."

Stunned silence fell over the assembled group and Pepper found herself the subject of five blank stares. Squirming uncomfortably beneath the scrutiny, she rallied and pointed a finger at the group.

"It's a great idea," she insisted.

Clint ran a palm down his face. "I am having horrible flashbacks to my first serious girlfriend," he muttered, reaching out a hand to Steve for the bottle of vodka.

"You and me both," Tony quipped as Clint ignored his shot glass and lifted the bottle to his lips. "Pep, what the hell are you thinking?"

"I thought that was your line," Natasha murmured to Steve. He ignored her cheeky comment and leaned forward, listening to Pepper's vehement and surprisingly coherent line of reasoning.

"The three of them have left SHIELD," she reminded Tony with a gesture at Steve and the assassins. "So the sanctioned safehouses aren't an option and SHIELD knows where any personal real estate is, I'd bet. And poor Steve is homeless!"

"Poor Steve technically has an apartment in Brooklyn," the soldier in question offered quietly, looking slightly put out, to Clint's amusement.

"That SHIELD paid for," she said with emphasis, readjusting her seat to face him earnestly. "I know what I'm talking about."

"We have a house to go to," Natasha informed Pepper placidly, a gentle reminder. When Tony perked hopefully, the redhead gave a sly grin and continued, "But it is very far removed."
"See?" Pepper turned back to Tony, triumphant. "They need to stay with us. And this place is too cramped for everyone."

"I'm not building them a mansion," Tony warned her, wiggling his fingers for the bottle of alcohol. Steve plucked it from Clint's lax grip and poured Tony another shot, ignoring Clint's growl of indignation and returning the bottle to the archer's grasp when he was finished.

"Of course not," Pepper soothed. "Stark Hall has been unoccupied since the fifties. There's plenty of space there."

Tony's mouth dropped open. "That old heap?"

"I've made sure it's been kept in good condition," she said crossly. "It's wired into the secure mainframe and has been upgraded each time you did something to the Malibu house. There's even lab space partitioned off for you."

"Why?" Tony managed, his voice strangled.

She shrugged, smiling teasingly at him. "I was going to turn it into my vacation home."

Bruce chuckled softly and she whirled on him. "You haven't left the lab in weeks, so I doubt you'd even notice a change of scenery. You're coming too."

Bruce blinked bemusedly, flicking his eyes to the right at Steve's quiet laugh. "I've left the lab."

"Leaving to shower and change your clothes so that you don't look like a slob doesn't count," she retorted. Directing her words to the group again, she held out her hands entreatingly. "What is there to lose?"

"Limbs," Clint muttered. "I think there will be loss of limbs if we do this."

Natasha rose onto her knees and leaned across the table. She pried the bottle from his fingers and took a swig, placing it on the table with a clink. Clint picked it up with a small glare. "I was going to say blood."

"Guys," Steve admonished slightly, throwing a concerned glance at Pepper's frown. He looked panicked as her breath hitched, but relaxed when she turned her liquid eyes on Tony.

"Pepper," he began, leaning back as far as the couch would allow.

She set her glass on the floor and sobered slightly, locking eyes with him. "Please."

"Fuck all," Tony muttered after a few moments. "Fine. The house is open for anyone that wants it."

"Alright," Steve murmured, shifting his attention to the assassins. "What do you guys think?"

Clint finally set the bottle of vodka down and faced Natasha, raising one eyebrow ever so slightly. She quirked her lips and cocked her head, which made him grin. Flicking his eyes at a curious Pepper, he twitched his shoulders in a shrug and looked back at Steve. "We're in."

The soldier nodded his acceptance with a smile and set his sights on Bruce. "Doctor Banner?"

"I have my work here," the scientist mumbled, picking at a nonexistent spot on his pants.

Tony snorted. "That's portable. If I can move my entire lab, when it hasn't been destroyed, from coast to coast, then you can pack up your notebooks and your cultures and come live with us."
Bruce opened his mouth to protest, but Tony sent him a quelling glare. Snapping his jaw shut, Bruce held out his shot glass to be refilled. "Looks like we're moving in together."

It soon became common knowledge that Pepper, when given a project, was ruthlessly efficient. Rather than the full week she’d planned for, the team was ready to leave after three days. Upon finding out that Clint and Natasha were driving a purloined SHIELD car, she handed them the keys to her violet Acura to drive out to the mansion. Tony had made a sniping comment, out of Pepper's earshot, about grandpas like Steve taking too much time on the road. Steve speared Tony with a look that promised a street race to the mansion.

"Let's hope they don't kill themselves in this pissing contest," Natasha muttered beneath her breath, settling into the leather seat as Steve's motorcycle peeled out of the underground garage in fast pursuit of Tony's Audi. Pepper and Bruce followed more sedately in a sedan, leaving the assassins to bring up the rear.

Shrugging, Clint said nothing as he pulled out of the garage. Flicking a glance his way, she made another few, halfhearted attempts at conversation that he smoothly rebuffed. She finally got his hint around the city limits, snuggling further into the corner of the car and falling silent.

He could feel the tension between his shoulder blades leak out as they finally left the interstate behind and began driving on curving roads shadowed with leafy trees. At her soft instruction after a couple of hours of quiet, he turned off onto a winding private drive.

"Holy shit," Clint breathed as they rounded the last bend in the road and the trees opened up. Stark Hall was less of a hall and more of the largest mansion Clint had seen outside of Europe. It was a massive Edwardian building, set into the woods at the foothills of the Catskill mountains like it belonged there. The dove-gray stones had weathered slightly so that the edges were softer, blurred, and looking almost as if the structure had always been there.

Pepper suddenly appeared in the doorway, smiling and waving them around to the garage on the left. In what seemed to be a Stark–approved architectural theme, the garage was below ground and spanned the length of the house. The other two cars and Steve's bike were already parked, so Clint slid the Acura between them and stepped out, stretching his legs.

"The others have already congregated in the foyer," a cultured voice announced and Clint nearly took out the speakers in his shock.

"The fucking Terminator is here, too?"

Natasha laughed lightly as Pepper materialized in the garage, beckoning them forward. Clint glared at Natasha's curls, stepping up the stairs behind her. "JARVIS goes everywhere Tony goes. Of course he's here," she scolded lightly.

"My apologies for startling you, Agent Barton." The cool sound of JARVIS's voice followed them through the halls to where Tony was entertaining Bruce and Steve. "However, I am still bodiless, and therefore, still nothing like the Terminator."

"I already regret this decision," Clint whispered furiously to Natasha's ear.

"Deal with it," she purred back. His caustic response was swallowed as Tony began the tour, which he immediately tuned out in favor of observation.

The mansion was, Clint begrudged, rather impressive. Though the exterior was dated to the early
nineteenth century, someone had gutted the house on the inside to create large open spaces and a sense of connectivity throughout. The garage had been halved to accommodate Tony's lab space. Stairs rose from the garage, over the lab, to the sub-basement, where the old servants' quarters had been converted to guest and laundry rooms.

A second set of stairs at the opposite end opened into the first floor, a likely well–stocked bar to the right of the entrance. Ascending, Clint could see the edge of an enormous television screen and a couple of squishy couches and chairs. The kitchen was set behind the lounge area, glaringly modern in contrast to the old oak table and well-worn chairs that sat in the center. A floor–to–ceiling picture window led to the patio outside, overlooking the mountains, and Tony took the staircase on the opposite side of the kitchen, leading them up to the second floor bedrooms.

The first bedroom on the left, facing the drive was empty, Tony pointed out, as was the one across from it. Bruce was in the room beside the second guest room, Steve next to him, a reserved room for Thor across from Steve, Natasha next to Thor, Clint across from her, with Tony and Pepper in the master bedroom at the end of the hall. Pepper had thoughtfully decorated each room with items that she seemed to think exemplified their personal tastes.

Bruce's room was a soothing pale blue, furnished with darkly–stained wood and various pictures of flora along the walls. A large bookcase stood to the right of the window, a plush armchair placed strategically in front and a bubbling rock fountain on the accompanying table.

Steve's may as well have been transported directly from nineteen forty–five and Clint smiled at the quiet wonder on the soldier's face when he saw it. The furnishings were cherry wood and luxurious without being overt. The walls were a shade of deep blue that Clint would bet matched Steve's shield and a short shelf of records sat in the corner, an old phonograph and a standing radio on top.

Pepper seemed to have remembered a thing or two about Natasha from her stint as Natalie Rushman, judging from the decorations in her room. The bedcovers were a soft cream color, buried beneath piles of lush pillows. A small desk sat on the opposite wall, a gun cleaning kit open on top which caused Natasha to shoot her an amused grin. Photographs of the world's capital cities hung clustered on the charcoal colored walls and Clint found himself picking out the places they'd been.

Pepper cleared her throat softly, and Clint realized that he was still standing in Natasha's bedroom. Tony was looking at him expectantly, and, shooting the smirking billionaire a scowl, he entered his room.

"I wasn't quite sure of your tastes," Pepper said gently as he stepped inside, his famous eyes taking in the sights. "Steve and Bruce are easy to read, practically open books, the two of them. I don't think that Thor will be spending all that much time here, though I might be wrong, and I already knew a little of Natasha's personality. But you. You were more difficult to decipher."

"You didn't do half bad," he muttered. The bedcovers were a faded forest green, a splash of color in the otherwise spartan room. A weight set occupied the wall across from the bed, the white walls pleasingly bare, save for a dartboard that made Clint smile nostalgically. "You were paying attention to the stories the other night. After the reception."

"I was. And Phil told me, once, how he met you," she replied quietly. "I thought you might like it."

He nodded once in her direction. "I do. Thank you."

Seemingly aware that the conversation was finished and showing more tact in that moment than Tony had in his whole body, Pepper stepped back into the hallway. "I'll let you know what we're doing for dinner."

Clint let his breath out in a whoosh as she closed the door and fell into the wall, sliding to the floor. Natasha slinked in seconds later, to his chagrin but not surprise.

"Well?"

"This is stupid," he muttered, rubbing tiredly at his eyes. She waited patiently, somehow knowing that he had more to say, and it irked him that she could read him better than he could read her. "We are grown-ass men and we're all staying over at Stark's place like some kind of sick sleepover."

He knew he'd annoyed her, could feel her narrow her eyes. "Did you have a better plan in mind? Because we tried separating and that didn't end all that well, as you'll recall."

"It could have been worse," he pointed out sullenly.

"And it could have been better," she shot back. "We should have been there for Tony."

He raised an eyebrow at her, his sharp ears identifying the guilt that laced her tone. "Steve getting to you? Or did you suddenly reevaluate Stark when I wasn't looking?"

"I think that this is a good idea," she insisted, ignoring his mocking insight. "And it's a nice place, you have to admit."

"I would prefer my own safe house to this," he replied petulantly, consciously ignoring the guilt trip she was trying. Natasha sighed, making herself far too comfortable on his bed.

"We're part of a team now," she reminded him. "We made this choice in medical, when you offered to fly Steve to New York and I went with you. So we're going to have to live with it and if this arrangement is how we do that, then that's it."

"One battle," Clint murmured, brows drawn low. "Does not make us a team."

She glared at him from his pillow. "Steve won't be happy to hear you say that."

"Natasha," he warned, secretly thankful that her scathing reply was interrupted by Steve's cheerful appearance at the door.

"Stark and Miss Potts would like to ask what you'd like for dinner."

"Nothing Tony makes," Natasha said immediately. "Charcoal isn't particularly appetizing."

Steve blinked at her with some puzzlement, but nodded in deference to her choice. "They said they were ordering out, whatever that means."

"Pizza," Clint explained succinctly, ignoring Steve's silent gesture for additional information and rising to his feet. "Pepperoni."

"Well, you're not getting anchovies," Steve told him, stepping towards the door. He paused when Clint gave him a casual wave and opened the window, stepping out onto the ledge and pulling himself up onto the roof. Steve turned to a frustrated Natasha. "I take it things are not going as well as we'd hoped."

"What gave you that idea?" She huffed at a lock of hair that was obscuring her vision. "Clint will be fine, once he calms down."

Steve grinned slightly. "What was it this time?"
"The surface reason or the real reason?" At his expectant look, she sighed. "He's feeling responsible for Coulson."

"I can imagine."

The phrase itself was innocent and remarkably sincere, but Natasha was suddenly, inexplicably, furious. She felt her eyes narrow to angry slits and she icily replied, "That's doubtful."

Steve's gaze shot to hers immediately, confusion sliding across his face for a moment before his expression became inscrutable. For the first time in years, she felt her surety in herself falter, oddly wishing she'd spent more time listening to Phil's stories about the man who stood before her.

Deliberately, he repeated his words. "I can imagine."

Turning sharply on one heel, he left the room and Natasha slumped gracelessly.

"Fuck."

After a quick check on Doctor Banner, Steve wandered idly downstairs, ignoring the chore of unpacking what few belongings he had and the sting of Natasha's unexpected rebuke. He'd thought that they had settled things on the helicarrier, and then quickly remembered that, assassin she may be, Natasha was also a woman. Smiling nostalgically to himself as he remembered Peggy's words, he realized that he still didn't know a bloody thing about them.

Hearing voices in the kitchen, he thumped a little louder in his descent, hoping to alert those gathered downstairs to his presence. He held back a petty smirk at the irritated look on Tony's face when he reached the kitchen. Grinning at Pepper, he greeted them.

"Everyone upstairs agrees on pizza," he announced. "And I just wanted to say thank you to you both, for letting us stay in the first place and for the thoughtful rooms."

Pepper smiled and gently pressed her elbow into Tony's side. The billionaire glared briefly at her and shrugged his shoulders. "Not an issue."

Steve murmured a wordless response and eyed his shoes. Stark still unnerved him, and he knew there was far too much shared history and an awkward conversation awaiting the two of them. Pepper seemed to know it too, because when she began to inch away, Tony glanced at her with thinly veiled panic and dismay.

"Well, if we're having pizza, then Fratelli's it is," he announced, slapping his hands together. "One of everything, I think, and then whatever the rest of you guys are having. Want to get on that, Pep?"

Pepper rolled her eyes at his obvious ploy, returning subtly to the kitchen. "I'll have JARVIS call the order in."

"Call it in?" Steve entered the conversation, brow furrowed in question.

"You call the pizza place, leave an order, and a pimply faced teenager with no social skills drives it to your front door when it's ready," Tony explained flippantly. Pepper smiled at the way Steve's face lit up.

"They do that now? That's so neat!" His excitement was infectious, and Pepper found herself feeling inexplicably fond of the soldier. Seeing the set of Tony's jaw, she pinched him, a warning to behave and he turned to her, incredulous. Oblivious to the undercurrents between the power couple in front
of him, Steve continued, "I'll go tell the others then. When do you think it'll be ready?"

"Given the size of the order we're going to have to place," Pepper mused. "I'd say about an hour or an hour and a half."

Steve nodded once and headed back the stairs, unaware of how Pepper matched Tony's glare with one of her own. Tony narrowed his eyes at her. "Why did you pinch me?"

"You were going to say something mean," she countered.

"You don't know that," he retorted, crossing his arms carefully.

"I know you." Pepper poked her finger into Tony's bicep for emphasis. "And I know what's in your attic."

Tony's face was suddenly blank, the levity evaporating from his voice in an instant. "We're not discussing that, at all, ever."

They faced off for a beat before Pepper conceded. "Alright," she sighed, ducking her head. "Alright. But promise me that you're not going to attack Steve."

"Why would I attack him? I'm not wearing my suit right now. He would absolutely win."

"Tony."

He rolled his eyes. "Fine."

"Thank you." She leaned up and kissed him on the cheek.

"You know," he began tauntingly. "The last time you took in a stray, she turned out to be a spy."

She smirked at him over her shoulder, walking to the nearest console to place the pizza order, and snarked back. "I'm fairly certain that you were the one to hire Natasha. That makes her your stray. And speaking of, given the house full of people we now have, you have absolutely no room to talk, do you?"

Tony wrinkled his nose. "Fair point."

Steve quietly informed the others of the plan and retreated into his room, reverently fingering through the records and smiling nostalgically at the familiar names. Selecting a Judy Garland album, he carefully placed it on the turntable and dropped the needle. The soft strains of *The Boy Next Door*, a song that Peggy used to hum when she thought that no one was listening, drifted through the room and Steve smiled.

Setting his trunk in front of the empty dresser, he proceeded to begin unpacking. He'd worked his way from Judy Garland to Bing Crosby to the early days of Frank Sinatra when he felt the downy hairs in his neck prickle. He turned just in time to see Clint step into the doorway, the archer's feet bare.

"Pizza's here."

Steve nodded. "Did you see the car come up the drive?"

"Yeah." Clint ran a hand through his hair, sniffing loudly. He blinked at Steve when the soldier dipped his hand into his pocket and retrieved a handkerchief, keeping his arms crossed stubbornly
until the offering returned to Steve's pocket. "There's a patio on the roof that's pretty nice, if a little cold this time of year."

"I'll keep that in mind," Steve promised, moving towards the door. Clint slid aside to let him pass and trailed him down to the kitchen. Pepper seemed to have tasked Bruce and Tony with choosing a movie to watch during dinner, as the two were standing next to the rather monstrous television discussing the science behind creating something that they called a lightsaber. Natasha was at the kitchen table, sipping at a glass of water and talking softly with Pepper. The women quickly quieted when they arrived downstairs.

Clint snorted a laugh, ducking around the table and plucking Natasha's glass from her grasp. "Talking about me, Babushka?"

"No," she replied calmly, glowering at Tony's gleeful face. "Call me that, Stark, and I'll break both your legs. Go pay for the pizza."

Tony raised an eyebrow at her. "The doorbell hasn't even rung yet."

Steve would have sworn that the delivery boy had waited for a signal from the redhead, because, no sooner had the words left his mouth, than the bell chimed merrily through the house. Pepper giggled into her palm as Natasha simply gave Tony a supercilious stare. The billionaire pointed a finger at her.

"I will find out how you did that," he promised, heading towards the front door. "There's no spying in my house."

Pepper looked entreatingly at Steve. "Would you please carry the boxes? I'm not sure Tony realizes quite how many we ordered."

"Of course," he agreed immediately. Tony glanced at him askance when he caught up to the billionaire, but said nothing and simply gestured for Steve to take the stack of pizza boxes that the delivery boy was struggling to carry.

Leaving Tony to pay, Steve brought everything back to the kitchen and everyone seemed to realize how hungry they were. Slices were quickly doled out onto plates and they settled on the couches, absently watching some kind of science fiction television marathon with little conversation.

When the meal was finished and they'd sat silently for a bit, Steve glanced around the room with helplessness. Tony and Pepper were sprawled half-asleep on one couch, Natasha and Clint curled on the other, and Bruce had moved to the kitchen table with a book, only half listening to the news that now played.

They weren't the Howling Commandos, and they never would be, but the Avengers could be something so much more. They were brimming with potential, practically swimming in it, and Steve had no idea how to make that potential a reality. Somehow, he knew it was up to him, now, after the extended absence, more than ever. Stark had named him the leader that day in the street, amidst the debris and rubble and the battle for Earth, and he could not fail in this. Not like he had with Bucky.

The thought was lightning fast and wholly unexpected, like a hard jab to the gut. Rising suddenly, needing to escape the memory, he found the room's attention on him.

"I, uh," he stuttered. "I think I'm going to hit the sack."

Natasha stretched her limbs, catlike, and straightened. "Good idea," she remarked, Clint mimicking her movements.
"According to the weather, it's supposed to dip below freezing tonight," Pepper announced with a nod at the television. Swatting at Tony's hands, she rose. "I'll grab some of the extra blankets from the hall closet for you all."

Bruce and Tony stood as well, and Steve found himself traipsing up the stairs after everyone. By the time he reached the apex, Clint had disappeared behind his closed door with a massive quilt trailing behind him and Natasha was quietly doing the same. Bruce waved goodnight to Tony, who stumbled tiredly to the end of the hall. Pepper watched him enter their room inscrutably, and Steve felt like an intruder. He coughed lightly to get her attention and she turned her ear, acknowledging him.

"Are there any more blankets, Miss Potts?" Steve's polite question shook Pepper from her thoughts. She smiled at him quizzically.

"Of course, Steve." Handing him another quilt, she was surprised when he reached past her to pick up three more. "If I may," she began, hesitating when he looked up with an open face. "If the heat is set too low, I can always turn it up for you."

"That's kind of you to offer, ma'am, but I don't want to be a bother to anyone else," he smiled ruefully. "I just uh, I don't want to wake up cold. Again." Giving her a nod of thanks, Steve headed back to his room with his armful of blankets, achingly aware of Pepper's gaze on his back as he did so.

Pepper Potts was naturally an early riser, and after years of working for Tony Stark, she'd learned to expect to be alone until roughly midday. The first morning after the Avengers had moved into Stark Hall, she was startled to find the kitchen was already occupied when she walked in. Steve Rogers was eyeing the pantry with a single minded determination she'd rarely seen outside of Tony's lab, but he whipped around at her small cry of surprise.

"I'm sorry, Miss Potts," he said contritely as she pressed a hand to her chest. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

Pepper held up a hand, placating, and waved the incident off. "It's fine. I'm afraid I'm used to being the only early bird in the house."

"Stark's not a morning person?" he asked, the hint of a wry grin coloring his voice. She smiled in return.

"Not particularly, no." Taking in the situation, she furrowed her brow. "Did you need me to find you something?"

He seemed surprised, and just a little abashed. "No, ma'am. I was just trying to figure out what to cook for breakfast."

"Steve." Pepper pulled out her best schoolteacher voice, the one that worked particularly well with Tony when he was incredibly drunk. "Please, call me Pepper."

He grinned apologetically. "Sorry. It's just a force of habit."

"And it's wonderful that someone left in this world still has some manners," she replied, not noticing the way he tensed slightly. "But we're going to be seeing a lot of each other, and I think we're going to be friends," she teased, and he ducked his head with a bashful smile. "Besides, Pepper rolls off the tongue so much better than Miss Potts, don't you think?"
"I think it's a lovely name," he replied honestly, and Pepper could only smile.

"So what are you trying to make?" His grin disappeared instantly and was replaced by something that reminded her of an aggrieved schoolboy.

"Everything's so different now," he commented offhandedly, staring distantly into the pantry. "Not even food tastes the same. So I was looking for something that couldn't change. Like bacon and eggs. But I can't find half the things I'd need to cook with."

He looked back at her silence. "I'm sorry if I was too bold," he offered apologetically. "But you're right. We're going to be friends. So let's start now, right?"

Pepper smiled brilliantly at him. "Right." Sliding around the counter, she looped an arm around Steve's, missing the slight blush on his cheeks at the contact.

"Spices are kept here," she pointed to the cabinet above the stove, "pots and pans are down here," indicating the set of cabinets beneath the island, "and everything else should be self explanatory."

"Thanks," he acknowledged, taking a moment to think. He turned to her, head cocked curiously. "Do you think everyone else would like breakfast too? We didn't cook in the Tower."

She snorted a laugh. "Because no one went to buy groceries for six people."

He acknowledged her point with a tilt of his head, continuing offhandedly, "It might be nice if we all start eating together."

"I think that's an excellent idea, Steve." She flashed him a smile. "Let's get started."

The remaining Avengers woke to the unmistakable scent of freshly cooked breakfast and hot coffee. One by one, they stumbled into the kitchen to find Pepper helping Steve at the stove.

"Good morning," she smiled brightly at the motley crew. "Help yourselves to a seat."

Tony brushed past her, dropping a kiss on her shoulder on his way to the coffee pot. "Java," he mumbled. "Sweet nectar of all that is good and holy, come to me."

Natasha, much more awake than her partner, watched with amusement as Tony wrestled with the pot, nearly upending it in the process, which caused a whine of distress from a zombie–like Clint.

"You know," Pepper whispered to Bruce. "Sometimes I wish he talked to me like he talks to his coffee."

Natasha snickered into her hand and Bruce smiled as he made a cup of tea. "I wouldn't hold my breath," he muttered dryly as Steve started dropping platter after platter of breakfast food on the kitchen table.

"I had no idea you could cook," Natasha commented, slapping Tony's questing hand from the plate of bacon. He scowled at her as he curled it back around his coffee mug.

Steve shrugged. "Bucky's mom taught me." There was a sense of finality to his statement and no one dared to ask anything else. Soon after, all chatter fell flat as the food flew from the platters to the plates to hungry bellies.

Clint, with the liberal application of food and coffee, quickly rejoined the land of the living. "This is fucking amazing," he muttered around a buttery piece of toast. "Are you going to cook all the time?"
Steve tilted his head, considering his cooling cup of coffee. "I hadn't really thought about it, but I suppose I could." He laughed a little. "As long as you guys don't mind the old fashioned, home cooked recipes from Mrs. Barnes."

"If it tastes as good as this did, I won't be complaining," Tony said. "Pepper, take him shopping for whatever he needs. My lab and I have a date. Banner, make it a threesome?"

And with that, the entire group scattered like leaves on the wind. Bruce rolled his eyes, but followed Tony down to the labs with a restrained excitement. Clint and Natasha silently disappeared out to the patio, moving perfectly in sync with each other without ever saying a word.

Tony had had the right idea, Steve thought to himself, tossing them all in one place like this, but it wasn't enough. They were a group of extremely independent, highly dangerous individuals – the entire situation was unstable, like putting a band-aid on a broken leg. And that didn't even begin to cover the conversation that was going to have to happen between Tony and himself. Steve grimaced. He was not looking forward to that.

"We don't have to go, if you'd rather not." Pepper's soft alto broke through his thoughts and Steve nearly tripped himself as he turned to face her.

"What?"

Pepper smiled gently. "To get kitchen supplies and gadgets and such. I know you were looking for a few things that you couldn't find."

"Oh!" Steve shook his head, as if the action itself could clear his head. "No, that's fine, Pepper. But I'm afraid you'll have to drive. I'm not sure where the closest store is."

She laughed, not unkindly, and he smiled a little in response. "Come on," she gestured, picking up her purse. "I'll take you in to town."

He trailed her to the garage, glimpsing Tony excitedly showing the lab space to an impressed Bruce, and opened the car door for her when she paused by the Audi, looking for the keys in her bag.

They weren't on the road long when the idle chitchat fell flat and Steve let his mind wander. She glanced over at him, taking in the set of his jaw and the little furrow between his eyes. Pepper was excellent at reading people after years of working for the moody Tony Stark, and Steve was quietly brooding in the seat next to her.

"Did it take you long to unpack?" At her direct question, he rearranged himself to face her better.

"Not really," he confessed. "I don't have much in the way of personal items, really. It's all been tossed by now."

Pepper mentally slapped herself. Trying to salvage the conversation, she continued. "You do have some clothes though, right?"

"Yeah. They had my measurements from my file, I guess, because one of the SHIELD agents brought me some pants and shirts." Steve fidgeted a little, picking at the crease on his aforementioned trousers. "He said he got them at a vintage store," he finished, his voice lilting a bit in question. She snorted.

"That explains that, then." At Steve's look, she hurried to explain. "There's nothing wrong with your clothes, per se, but –,"

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"I kind of dress like an old man," he finished wryly for her. Pepper had the grace to blush.

"A little bit, yes." She flashed him a smile. "Don't worry. I'll help you."

"I might need a lot of it," he replied, and his voice was hesitant.

She met his eyes for as long as she could, trying to lend some sincerity to her voice. "I'll help you."

They made it out of the kitchen supply store relatively unscathed, carrying the few items needed to round out Tony's collection, in addition to a whole host of cookbooks. Dropping the bags in the trunk, Pepper turned to Steve with a gleam in her eye.

"Clothes," she said succinctly, and giggled at the way he squared his shoulders. "You look like you're ready to do battle."

He shot her a look, and Pepper was rapidly realizing that Steve Rogers had a wicked sense of humor when he wanted to. "You look like you're about to attack me," he chided. "I've never seen anyone this excited about shopping."

Hooking an arm through his, she steered him towards the department store. "Not even your mother?"

"The Depression," he reminded her with a small grin, and she acceded.

"Then this is going to be a new experience for you," she informed him as they walked through the doors. "Because I love shopping, especially for other people."

She beelined for the men's section and wrangled an older salesman into taking Steve's measurements. The salesman introduced himself as Fred, and seemed to be a genial, laid–back sort of fellow. Steve was somewhat reminded of a more American, unpolished Falsworth. Once in possession of the necessary numbers, she instructed Fred to fit Steve for a suit and flitted off towards the rows of shirts and slacks.

Fred eyed Steve sympathetically. "Your girlfriend's a bit assertive, isn't she?"

"You've got no idea," Steve replied dryly. "And she's not even my girlfriend."

Fred laughed. "My sympathies to her boyfriend." Steve grinned at him and Fred clapped him on the shoulder. "Come on, son. Let's get you fitted before she comes back."

Pepper returned a short while later with an armload of miscellaneous clothes, smiling brightly. Dropping them in one of the fitting rooms, she joined the men. "You two look like you're getting along well," she commented. "How's it coming?"

"I've got the black suit marked up for you, ma'am," Fred told her, finishing up a few adjustments. "Have any other suits caught your eye?"

She glanced around, picking up a grey suit shot through with darker threads in a pattern similar to plaid. "How about this one?" she asked, holding it up to Steve. "It'll be better for parties. Everyone wears black to those kinds of things."

"I can't wear this," he protested weakly, shaking his head.

Pepper frowned, handing it to Fred, who quietly stepped back and gave them some privacy. "It's a suit! What's wrong with a suit?"
Steve gave her a look. "It's a three piece suit. I'm going to look like a mobster." Pepper burst into laughter.

"Steve, you will look nothing like a mobster," she assured him, her giggles tapering off. "Just try it on."

"If we end up at parties, can't I just wear my dress greens?" He felt childish for complaining, but Pepper was much more relentless than he'd anticipated. He gave her a hopeful look.

She gave him a thoughtful once-over. "It depends on how handsome you look in them."

Steve blushed madly and ducked into the dressing room, Pepper's laughter trailing him. He sighed at the stack of clothes that she had waiting, but set about trying them on, if only to humor her. She had good taste, he had to admit. The clothes were simple enough that he felt at ease in them, but still somewhat modern.

"Steve," she called as he pulled a shirt over his head. He could practically see her tapping her foot impatiently. "If you don't come out and show me how those clothes look, I'm coming in to get you."

He emerged from the dressing room, tugging lightly on the hem of the blue shirt. He frowned. "I'm not so sure about the jeans," he confessed hesitantly.

She waved away his concerns. "They're standard fare now. Comfortable, but durable. You'll be getting at least two pair for daily wear." She eyed him critically. "I love that shirt though. It really brings out the color of your eyes."

Steve felt his cheeks heat. "So, I'm getting the shirt too?"

She smiled kindly. "Yes, Steve. We're getting the shirt." She made shooing motions at him. "Go try on the rest of it."

He steadily worked his way through the pile of clothes that she had for him, making neat piles of things he wanted to keep, things he wasn't sold on, and things he would never wear. He padded out and handed Fred the pile of returns, sharing a knowing smile with the older man. Steve meandered through the stacks, picking up a few items, but mostly searching for Pepper.

He found her near some stacks of what she'd called polo shirts, flipping through the piles. She held up a shirt, then refolded it and picked up a larger size. Satisfied, she picked her way through the colors, smirking to herself when she added a lilac colored one to her stack. Steve finally stepped over to her.

Eyeing the stack of brightly hued shirts, he cleared his throat. At her questioning look, he pointed to the band of pastels among the pile. "I uh, I don't wear those colors."

Pepper narrowed her eyes, but smiled to show that she was teasing. "They're not for you. I think I've seen Bruce wear three shirts the entire time I've known him. The poor man needs diversity."

Steve nodded, thinking that it was just better to agree with her than to say anything else. Holding out his arms, he spun around. "What do you think?"

"I think purple really isn't your color." She grinned. He laughed in response as she caught sight of the plaid shirts and khaki pants in his hand. Shaking her head slightly, her smile softened. "Can't really take the forties out of the man, can you?"

The corners of his lips twitched upwards, but his eyes were still sad. "Not just yet, at least."
Nudging gently, Pepper herded him towards the checkout. In the end, she bullied Steve into buying four pairs of jeans and the full, three-piece suit, along with most of the shirts she'd picked out. After he'd turned the full force of what Bucky had called "puppy dog eyes" on her, she let him pick up a few more button-down shirts and khaki trousers. He tried not to whistle at the final tally, Pepper nonchalantly handing over Tony's credit card. Steve wasn't quite sure why it was black, but he figured it meant something important by the subtle way the Fred's eyes widened.

"Pepper," he whispered in her ear. She shushed him, handing him the bags, and he bit his tongue until they reached the car. Once the doors were shut, however, he had to say something. "Pepper, that's too much."

"Steve," she sighed, looking slightly tired for the first time. "This isn't the Depression anymore. And Tony has more than enough money. He won't even notice this."

Steve frowned, feeling just a little exasperated with his new friend. "It's not about the money," he retorted. "Well, it's not completely about the money. SHIELD briefed me on inflation when they handed me my banking information."

Pepper glanced questioningly at him as she pulled out of the parking spot. "Banking information?"

"Yeah," Steve scratched the back of his neck bashfully. "Apparently being encased in ice for seventy years has pretty steep hazard pay. But that's not the point." Pepper nodded for him to continue. "The point is that I'm not the kind of guy that takes handouts."

"It's not a handout," she said quickly. "It's just a friend doing something nice for another friend."

"In my day," he said, smiling. "That was called a handout."

She glared halfheartedly at him. "You're being very difficult, Captain Rogers."

"I'm sorry." He may have apologized, but his voice was stubborn. "I'm going to have to insist that I reimburse you."

"Tony won't stand for that."

Steve's voice was dry. "I'm sure there are many things Stark doesn't stand for."

"He won't let you pay him," Pepper insisted. "I know him well enough to know that."

"I'm not so sure he'd be upset if I did," Steve ventured. "We didn't exactly get off on the right foot, even if my Christmas present didn't get returned."

"That's because he liked it," she informed him. "For all of his technological advances, even Tony can't resist a good record player."

"Good to know," Steve muttered as Pepper neatly sidestepped the conversational tangent and returned to the original argument with a firm tone.

"Steve, trust me when I tell you that Tony won't accept money from any of you. Especially you," she emphasized. "I can't go into it, but it won't help your relationship any if you push the issue."

Steve frowned, quiet for a moment. Finally, he sighed. "You know him better than I do," he replied. "So I'll trust your judgment."

Pepper relaxed, unaware that she'd been so tense in the first place. "Thank you." She glanced over at
him when they lapsed into a long silence. "I'm not trying to micromanage anything," she said.

Steve frowned, blinking his eyes rapidly. "What?"

"Oh, um," Pepper hemmed as she searched for the right words. "Meddle," she settled on, relieved when that seemed to clear the wrinkles from his forehead. "I know that you and Tony have had your issues, so trust me when I say that there is a solution. But you have to be patient with him."

"I can be patient," he said softly. "When I need to be."

"Good," she whispered, and let the matter drop.

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To be continued in Chapter Three.
Chapter Three

"You must remember, family is often born of blood, but it doesn't depend on blood. Nor is it exclusive of friendship. Family members can be your best friends, you know. And best friends, whether or not they are related to you, can be your family."

— Trenton Lee Stewart, *The Mysterious Benedict Society*

... 

"The most important thing in life is your family. There are days you love them, and others you don't, but in the end they're the people you always come home to. Sometimes it's the family you're born into, and sometimes it's the one you make for yourself."

— Candice Bergen, *Sex and the City*

Chapter Three

The hodgepodge group fell into a similar routine to the one they had maintained at the Tower, to Pepper's quiet dismay. Flicking her eyes up from the magazine she was pretending to peruse, she silently observed her housemates for a few minutes.

Bruce nibbled at the cap of his pen as he worked his way through a New York Times crossword puzzle, sitting at the end of the kitchen table. She inwardly smiled to see that he was wearing one of the new shirts she'd bought him. Steve reclined leisurely across from the scientist, flipping through the cookbooks he'd purchased and marking recipes. Clint and Natasha had gone outside to spar, occasionally darting into and then out of Pepper's line of vision as their fight ranged across the backyard. Tony sat sullenly on the opposite couch, alternating between making sarcastic comments to the muted television and looking extremely bored.

He heaved a loud sigh and glanced in her direction. Realizing that she was watching him, he grinned. "See something you like, Potts?"

"Actually, yes," she said, marking her place in her magazine with a finger. "That is a lovely color for a couch."

"Not your best retort, Pep," Tony said in response, rolling his eyes at her with a teasing grin on his face. He relaxed his muscles, allowing his limbs to dangle listlessly. "I'm disappointed."

She snorted, returning to her magazine and giving a curious Steve a reassuring smile. "Your tongue has grown sharper in the last few weeks."

"Well, now that I'm not doing anything, at all, I have plenty of time to hone my wit," he retorted. "I would probably be nicer if I could work."

"We had a deal," she reminded him lightly, turning her gaze to her magazine.

"Technically it was not a deal," he corrected, rising to his feet and moving to block the article she was reading. "It was you giving me an order."

"More like a friendly request, I like to think," she murmured, turning guileless eyes towards him.
He raised an eyebrow at her, folding his arms across his chest. "I don't recall it being a question."

She smiled brightly at him. "That's a pity."

"Pepper, please," he whined, resorting to taking the magazine from her hands and tossing it over his shoulder. Steve looked up with wide eyes at his plea. Bruce had already abandoned his puzzle and was now watching them with amusement. "I have to have something to do here. I might actually go certifiably insane."

She hummed. "You're not already?"

"Pep." He met her gaze seriously and she sighed.

"Alright," she capitulated. Pushing lightly on his abdomen until he moved, she reached around him to pick up a tablet from the table and held it out. "Whatever you want. And make sure you get something for Bruce. He's going to need a lab here, too."

"You're the best." He dropped a quick kiss on her lips and settled himself happily on the couch.

"Just ship everything to the Tower."

He blinked at her. "Why?"

"I've got a few things that I want to bring out here, like some luggage and the robots and the Mark VII, and it'll be easier to load there," she informed him.

He pursed his lips and returned his attention to the tablet. "That's acceptable."

"How generous of you," she murmured, suppressing a grin. He waved a hand in acknowledgement, losing himself in his project. She watched him fondly for a moment, and then turned to the two in the kitchen. "I am going to regret this."

Tony smirked at her, his eyes never leaving the StarkPad. "You don't already?"

"Hi there." Natasha glanced up at the greeting, mildly surprised to see Pepper in her doorway. "May I come in?"

"It's your house," Natasha shrugged, marking the place in her book, and Pepper pursed her lips.

"It's still Tony's house, technically."

Natasha snorted, leaning back against the wall. "In name, sure. I'd wager you did everything else with it."

"Touché," Pepper said with a small smile, and fell silent. Natasha simply waited, hazarding a guess that Pepper still had something in her mind, when the taller woman suddenly spoke. "I just wanted to make sure that everything was alright."

Natasha blinked slowly at the taller woman. "The room is lovely, yes."

"That's not what I meant." Pepper sighed loudly and began twisting the ring she wore on her finger. "The last time that we talked, I was a little harsh and I wanted to make sure that everything was going to be fine."

"Between us?"
The incredulity in her voice must have been apparent, because Pepper shifted on her feet, taking a somewhat defensive stance. "I don't expect us to be friends, for any number of reasons, but we're going to be living together for the foreseeable future. I think that we should try to be civil."

"I've been civil," Natasha interjected, frowning.

Pepper inclined her head in acknowledgement. "Perhaps I should have said professional. And I appreciate your attitude so far."

"Pepper," Natasha sighed, leaning forward. "I understood your reaction at the time and I wasn't the least bit offended. Until you started blaming me for Tony's behavior."

Pepper blushed lightly. "I might have overreacted. A lot."

"As I said, it's understandable." Natasha cocked her head at Pepper. "I'm not the one that needs to forgive an offense."

The taller woman was silent for a long moment. "I think I already have. You did help save his life, after all."

"For better or for worse," Natasha quipped, smiling at Pepper's laugh.

"Well then," Pepper announced after a moment. "I should get going. Lots of work to do."

Natasha murmured an agreement as Pepper left. She stared at the picture of Madrid on her wall, contemplating the conversation. Finally deciding to leave it be, she opened her book again and picked up where she had left off. Pepper had thoughtfully closed the door behind her and there was a set of soft raps. Natasha leaned her head back and eyed the door for a moment.

"No," she murmured to herself. "No more." Ignoring the knocking, she burrowed deeper into the pillows surrounding her and continued reading.

There was a scratching sound at her window a few minutes later and Natasha tensed, her gaze darting to the casement. She sighed as Clint slid his knife beneath the sill and pried the panes upwards enough to allow him to slip through the opening. She raised an eyebrow from her position on the bed, turning the page in her novel with a decisive flick.

"I didn't answer the door for a reason, you know," she murmured calmly.

Clint disregarded her comment and cocked his head at her attire. "Isn't that Banner's sweater?"

"Yes," she replied succinctly. "Your point?"

"Why?"

She shrugged, finally placing a bookmark in between the pages and bringing her gaze to his. "His are more comfortable than mine."

Clint nodded, accepting her explanation and knocked a few pillows to the floor, stretching out alongside her. "Does he know you have his sweater?"

"No." She grinned at him with satisfaction.

He snorted. "I bet Steve would notice."

"That it was Bruce's sweater or that I'd stolen something of his?"
Clint thought about it for a moment. "Both. I can do better."

She turned to face him fully. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." He grinned at her. "Pickpocket war?"

"This had better not be like that prank war on the helicarrier," she warned.

He scoffed good naturedly at her. "You never got hit with a paintball."

"Because you knew I'd kill you," she returned, opening her book again. "Game on."

Groaning into his pillow, Tony rolled over, wincing at the still healing wound in his chest. His left hand reached out to Pepper's side, questing, and found only cold linen. He raised his head at a noise from the bathroom and rubbed ineffectually at his bleary eyes, frowning at Pepper's low chuckle.

"You look so pathetic," she murmured, crawling up the covers. "It's almost enough to induce me to stay."

Finally waking up to the point where he could register what Pepper was saying, Tony rose just enough to run his gaze down her frame. "What are you wearing?"

"A suit," she replied amusedly. "Very proper business attire, so I'm told."

"Why are you going to work?" Tony scooted backwards, propping himself up on his hands. Pepper's eyes shot down to the white gauze covering his chest and he resisted the urge to snap his fingers for her attention. "I thought we had a 'no work' policy for the next few weeks."

"You have a 'no work' policy for the next few weeks," she amended, bringing her gaze back to his. Reaching back to her bedside table, she picked up a shot glass containing a number of multicolored pills. "At least. I'm going in to work, because it is my job, and I have to. Take these."

Tony frowned at her, but accepted the glass. "I don't like pills."

"That's too bad for you, because this kind of anti-rejection medication doesn't come intravenously."

He waved her comment aside, still holding onto the pills. "I'm sure it can. You should look into that. Then I'd probably be done with the regimen faster."

"You wouldn't need the regimen at all if you'd listened to me," she murmured darkly.

"Hey, you said the surgery was a good idea," he reminded her. "I did listen to you."

She sighed, poking him safely in the shoulder. "I said that removing the shrapnel was a good idea. I did not say that taking out the entire arc reactor was a good idea."

"Details." Tony shrugged. "Besides, without the shrapnel, there wasn't a need for the arc reactor."

"Other than plugging the six inch hole in your chest?" she asked wryly. "No, none at all. Now, take your pills, because I have to work."

He dry swallowed the lot, sneaking one arm around her waist. "No, you don't have to work. As the one who is, technically, still your employer, I decree that you are absolutely allowed to stay here, at home, with me."
"You decree, do you?"

"Yes, I do," he affirmed, sighing when she locked her fingers around his wrist and pulled it from behind her. "What am I going to do while you're gone all day?"

Sliding from the bed, she raised an eyebrow at him. "What are you actually going to do, or what do I want you to do?"

"Aren't they the same thing?" he asked innocently.

"No. In fact, they rarely are," she laughed. Sobering slightly, she gave him a fond smile. "What you'll probably do, is spend all day locked in the lab, tinkering with whatever you can get your hands on. What I would like you to do is to spend some time with the team and get to know them in a setting that doesn't involve bloodshed."

"There are two assassins in the house," he pointed out wryly. "I expect bloodshed on a daily basis."

"Tony." He rolled his eyes at her firm tone, finally accepting that she wasn't going to drop the subject like he wanted. "I really think that it'll do everyone some good. You and Clint will get along like gangbusters if you really tried," she insisted.

"What does gangbusters even mean?" he interrupted, to no avail.

"And Natasha deserves a second chance," she finished with a slight glare. "She's a different person now than she was then."

Tony settled himself more comfortably beneath the coverlet. "Did Mister Mom tell you that?"

Pepper's slight glare became an outright scowl and Tony bolstered himself for a battle. "You need to go easier on Steve," she lectured sternly. "He's got it harder than anyone else and he's trying."

"Yes," Tony agreed, his eyes cold. "He's trying to pretend that I'm my father."

"Trust me," Pepper advised wryly. "He knows that the two of you are nothing alike."

Tony frowned, now thoroughly annoyed. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? Did he say something to you?"

"He hasn't said anything to me about it, but that doesn't mean I can't read him. Steve is very aware of where and, most importantly, when he is." She fixed him with a sympathetic look. "And there's no way that he could mistake the two of you."

He grumbled lightly, averting his gaze and finally reading the clock. "Why are you leaving now?"

"I have to, if I'm going to make it to the office on time," she reminded him. "It's over two hours to drive into the city."

"Come back to bed and call the helicopter. Half an hour, tops."

She sighed, leaning in to press a kiss to his cheek. "I will tomorrow. I'll see you tonight, Tony. Go back to sleep."

Steve woke as Pepper tiptoed down the hallway, oblivious to her exit. He glanced out of the window, noting the still dark sky in the pre–dawn hour, and groaned. Wishing, not for the first time, that he could still get a decent night's rest, he stared at the ceiling for a few minutes and desperately
tried to get back to sleep. The same serum that enhanced his muscles and metabolism had also, unfortunately, negated his need for more than a few hours of shuteye.

After a quarter of an hour, Steve finally gave up and rolled out of bed, shivering when his feet hit the cold hardwood. He padded softly downstairs and started the coffee maker, grateful that Pepper had taught him how to work the newfangled machine by himself. Pouring himself a large mug of espresso, he ducked past the bedrooms and made his way out onto the rooftop terrace to view the sunrise.

His drink was gone and the sky was just beginning to lighten when the distant rumble of an engine caught his attention. Climbing over to the front of the house, he watched with interest as a large semi–truck, laden with two trailers, creaked down the private drive. The semi pulled around the front of the mansion and eased to a stop, pointing the back end towards the garage.

Gauging the distance, Steve gripped his coffee cup firmly and hopped over the edge of the roof, dropping lightly onto the balls of his bare feet. A middle–aged man climbed out of the semi and Steve waved.

"Good morning," he greeted, catching the driver's attention. "What do you have here?"

The man tipped his hat to Steve. "Delivery for Mister Stark," he replied, his voice gravely with age. Steve nodded. "Does he need to sign for it or anything?" he asked curiously.

"No," the man laughed as he unhooked the second trailer from the assembly. "I got my orders and the directions from Miss Potts herself. I think that's good enough."

Steve smiled. "I agree."

With a wave, the man got back into the truck and pulled away as Bruce opened the front door and poked his head out.

"What on Earth is that?"

Steve turned around at the unexpected sound of Bruce's voice and shrugged his shoulders. "I have no idea."

Bruce contemplated the trailer for a moment and ran a hand through his hair, mussing it. "Tony will be up later," he told Steve, pausing in–sentence to yawn widely. "I say we leave it to him and have breakfast. I need some coffee."

Shooting the trailer one last glance, Steve ascended the front stairs and followed Bruce into the kitchen. Natasha was perched on the counter, dumping the contents of a coffee cup into the sink. She glared towards the men as they entered.

"Who made the coffee?"

Steve hesitated. "I did."

"That stuff is so strong it could burn a hole in my tongue," she informed him candidly, hopping down from the counter and pulling out the coffeepot. She moved to pour it down the drain as well, but Steve reached out for the handle. She looked at him, aghast. "You actually drank this?"

The tips of his ears reddened. "Yeah," he muttered, embarrassed.
Bruce plucked an empty mug from the cabinet and held it out to be filled. Steve poured him a splash, he and Natasha watching with interest as Bruce sampled it. The scientist shrugged.

"It tastes fine to me."

"You're both insane," Natasha scoffed disbelievingly.

Bruce took another sip. "Serum."

The other two occupants of the room stared at him. Natasha raised a brow. "What?"

"We both share some of the original Super Soldier serum," Bruce explained gesturing at Steve with his mug. "It boosted your metabolism by, what? Four times the normal rate?"

Steve nodded, setting the pot on the counter. "That's what they told me."

"So he needs the extra caffeine to feel any of the effects that the rest of us seem to require every morning." Bruce quirked his lips at Natasha. "I'm in the same boat, to an extent, because the serum that I used is a derivative. We don't share many traits, but an increased metabolism is one."

She indicated her understanding, her lips drawn. "It's still gross," she announced, pouring the men one last cup apiece and dumping the rest down the drain. "So I'm making drinkable coffee for the rest of us."

Steve chuckled, reaching into the fridge. "Fine with me," he said over his shoulder. "How do you all feel about omelets?"

The scent of fresh coffee and omelets soon lured Tony downstairs. Shuffling past the others, he poured a cup of coffee and plopped into a seat at the table, curling himself around the steaming mug. Bruce glanced back towards the stairwell.

"Clint won't be down here for another fifteen minutes," Natasha murmured, checking the time on the microwave. "It really does take him that long to get moving in the morning."

Bruce blinked at her, startled. "Oh, no, I was just wondering where Pepper was. She's usually down before me."

Tony mumbled something incoherent into his arm, and Natasha answered Bruce. "She went to the office early."

"How can you possibly know that?" Steve turned from the stove, setting a plate in front of her.

She shrugged, using the edge of her fork to cut off a bite. "I speak Stark."

"That makes one of us," Steve muttered beneath his breath, and Bruce choked on a laugh. Pouring another omelet base, he asked Natasha, "Do you think you can translate what he wants for breakfast?"

There was a grunt from Tony and she replied, "Coffee."

"Besides that."

She smirked at him over her fork. "There is no 'besides that'."

Steve simply shook his head and deferred to Bruce. Clint stumbled to the table a few minutes later, blindly stealing what was left of Bruce's espresso.
"You're going to regret that," Natasha warned him as he swallowed a large sip.

Clint processed her words and the strong taste of the drink, contemplating the black liquid. Shrugging, he took another sip as she polished off her breakfast, shaking her head at him. When the mug was empty, he frowned at it and raised bleary eyes to the room at large. "What was the racket this morning?"

Tony finally pulled his face from the crook of his elbow. "What racket?"

"It was probably the delivery," Steve answered, setting the coffeepot on the table. There was a short struggle between Clint and Tony for the handle, the archer emerging as the victor. Tony blinked at Steve as Clint poured himself another cup.

"What delivery?"

Steve pointed towards the front door. "The trailer that's outside."

Tony scrubbed at his eyes, looking suddenly more awake, and started towards the door. Bruce glanced at Steve and, after a split second of thought, nodded understandingly. "Tools."

"Right." Steve picked up the remainder of his coffee and followed Bruce outside, Clint and Natasha trailing behind him. Tony was scrutinizing the lock on the trailer door with a frown.

"Anyone have a pair of bolt cutters?" he asked offhandedly. "Because I really don't want to drive to town to buy some."

Steve smiled slightly, stepping forward. "Allow me."

Handing his mug to Bruce, he hooked his index fingers through the bolt and pulled outwards, shattering the metal arc. Tossing the pieces to the side, he reached down and threw open the door.

Clint whistled as Tony nodded his thanks and hopped up into the back. "I bet that comes in handy."

"On occasion," Steve admitted, peering into the trailer at the stacks of shipping crates.

Clint crossed his arms, watching Tony wade through the sea of containers. "What is all this?"

"This is going to be my new lab," Tony replied absently, contemplating the abundance in front of him. "And Banner's, of course."

"Really?" Natasha raised an eyebrow at Tony, the motion vaguely mocking. "Does he get one box or two?"

"Wake up, boys," he said, ignoring Natasha's quip and dropping the ramp as he snapped his fingers at a jumble of rods and wires. "Daddy needs you."

To the other men's surprise, the untidy heap began to move, separating itself into two distinct robots. Natasha watched impassively as they whirred into motion, rolling down the ramp and towards the garage. Steve looked at Tony with amazement.

"They listen to you?"

"Yeah," Tony grunted from inside the truck, pushing a stack of boxes towards the edge. "Wouldn't be any good if they didn't. Half the time, they aren't any good anyway."

The robot that consisted of a platform and a long arm that was bent in the middle, paused in its trek
towards the house. It chirruped sadly, claw drooping.

Tony rolled his eyes, resting one elbow on the box in front of him and addressing the bot. "Well, maybe if you stopped hosing me with the fire extinguisher, I would like you more."

"Weren't those destroyed in Malibu?"

Tony turned to Natasha with a black glare. "Pepper let me fix them."

Natasha's muttered query of "Does she know that?" was lost as the billionaire turned to Bruce, taking a clipboard from the wall of the trailer and tossing it to him.

"Check the manifest, would you? Dum-E, get down there with You."

Bruce stammered an agreement, beginning to inspect the boxes closest to him for some form of identification. Steve looked on in wonder as the robot chirped again, joining the first in the garage. Stepping into the trailer, he began peppering Tony with questions.

"How did you give them personalities? I didn't think that robots were sentient. Well, I know JARVIS is, but these aren't anything like JARVIS, are they? I mean, they're practically like puppies!"

Tony paused in his attempt to pick a box from the top of a stack and glanced at him, exasperated.

"If you help me take these boxes down to the garage, where Dum-E and You can get to them, I will answer all of your questions." He held up one hand to stave off an immediate query, flicking his eyes towards Clint when he joined them in the trailer. "One at a time."

"Fine," Steve agreed instantly as Natasha slipped quietly into the mansion. "Are they the same thing as JARVIS?"

"Sort of," Tony answered, stepping back and indicating which box he wanted Steve to take. "Dum-E and You have early versions of the JARVIS program."

Steve lifted the box easily and headed towards the ramp. Handing Clint the container, he faced Tony again, oblivious to Clint staggering beneath the sudden weight of the box. "Why do you call them that?"

"Because those are the names I gave them," Tony replied with a sigh. "There are more boxes over here, Spangles."

Steve paused, frowning suddenly in slight consternation. "I don't know if I like that nickname."

"Too bad," Tony retorted with a small grin. "I'm kind of a fan."

"What the fuck is all this shit, anyway?" The slight standoff ended with Clint's frustrated question, both men turning to watch the archer struggle with the heavy container. "Are there gold bars in here, or something?"

Tony waved a hand dismissively. "All of the gold is in the safe," he countered, oblivious to the sudden stares he received in response.

Steve snorted, and busied himself with another stack of boxes at Tony's resultant glare. Working together, with Steve handling the heavier items, the men worked their way to the back of the trailer where the items Pepper had loaded were. As the morning wore on, conversation lapsed, until Clint found a trunk hidden in the corner.
"What's this?"

Tony didn't bother looking up from the boxes he was stacking. "Probably a box, Barton. That is what the trailer is full of."

"Then why is this one black and labeled H. Stark, smartass?"

Steve glanced up to see Tony freeze, his brows lowering into a scowl. "Use your brain. And then get rid of it."

Hefting a container into his arms, Tony muscled his way past Steve and down the ramp. Clint watched him leave with irritated confusion. Throwing one last look Tony's way, Steve moved to Clint's side.

The archer frowned. "Get rid of it, how?"

"I'll take it," Steve murmured, lifting the old trunk with a sense of quiet reverence.

Clint threw his hands in the air. "What's the big fucking deal?"

"It was Tony's father's. I took all of his notebooks out, so it's just memorabilia and personal effects" Bruce explained softly, stepping in. He watched Steve take the box from the trailer and set it gently at the base of the mansion. "Steve and Howard were friends, and Tony and Howard were not."

Clint nodded shortly in understanding. "Daddy issues. Got it."

"To say the least, from what I understand," Bruce muttered. He opened his mouth to continue the conversation, but Clint had already turned his back and started down the ramp with an armful of boxes. Steve reentered the trailer, his face uncharacteristically solemn. Bruce blinked at him, and turned his gaze back to Clint. "What was that?"

"Hm?" The soldier looked distracted, and Bruce resisted the urge to huff impatiently. "What was what, Doctor Banner?"

Bruce opened his mouth to mention Clint when the archer ignored the ramp and hopped lightly into the back. "Never mind," he finally said, waving a hand at Steve. "It's nothing."

Conversation all but died, the last of the boxes being unloaded from the trailer with minimal direction. Clint bolted when the last case had been made its way down the ramp, but Bruce and Steve lingered for a few minutes.

"Is there anything else you need?" Steve asked politely when Tony picked up the last box. He shook his head, fumbling for the handles.

"I got it, Spangles," he mumbled. "Not really one to want help for this anyway."

Steve looked like he wanted to question the billionaire further, but Bruce nudged the soldier towards the front door.

"Of course not," the scientist agreed. "Tony has a particular set up in mind. We'd only get in the way."

Steve nodded immediately. "You're right, of course," he murmured, his eyes catching the subtle relaxing of Tony's shoulders as he turned back to the house.

Tony shot Bruce a grateful look before he carted the final box into the garage. Pausing just inside the
door, he waited until he heard Bruce's footsteps meet Steve and both sets walk up the front steps to the door before he sighed in relief.

Working with the group of them over the course of the morning had been secretly stressful and oddly comfortable at the same time. Pushing off from the wall, Tony shook the thoughts from his head. He was not nearly drunk enough to try and analyze the situation he'd found himself in the morning. What he really needed was to get his lab set up and lose himself in his new suit design.

Walking through the garage and into the lab space he'd cordoned off, he dropped the box he was carrying onto a stack and let his breath out in a whoosh, staring at the massive undertaking before him. Dum-E and You hovered anxiously in the background, waiting for instructions. Tony looked up at the empty space, his eyes narrowed in thought, and murmured, "This is what we're going to do."

The sound of a sledgehammer echoed through the house and Steve poked his head out of his doorway. Natasha was walking calmly towards her room and looked up at his sudden appearance, raising one brow in silent question. The hammer struck again and he shook his head to clear it.

"What was that?"

Her eyes narrowed slightly and widened in recognition when she heard another swift blow. "That's just Tony."

Steve frowned towards the stairwell. "Is he demolishing the whole mansion?"

"Probably just the basement," she replied with a small laugh that quickly died when he stared in her direction. "It's going to be fine. Don't worry."

"That's comforting," he muttered, leaning against the doorframe. She waited for a moment, recognizing that he wasn't quite finished with her. After a beat, he glanced up at her through his lashes. "So, how's Clint?"

She sighed, motioning him forward. He stepped into the hallway, gently shutting his door as she entered hers, and hesitated at her doorway. Spearing him with a look, she cocked her head at him.

"Aren't you coming in?"

He blushed a deep shade of red, to her immense curiosity. "I, uh," he stammered. "I'm from the forties."

She raised a brow. "I had heard."

He glared at her. "It used to be considered improper to enter a lady's room. Unless you were planning to," he paused. "Unless there was an understanding between the two of you."

She bit back on a snort of laughter at the embarrassment on his face. "I'll crack the door for you. You've got to enter the twenty-first century at some point, Steve."

Frowning at her jab, he crossed the threshold and sat tensely in her desk chair. She grinned at him and settled herself amidst the mass of fluffy pillows on her bed. He gave her a leading stare. "Well?"

"Clint's okay," she admitted, picking at the fringe on one of her pillows. "He's not talking about it though, not even with me."

"I gathered that," Steve put in wryly. "But he needs to grieve properly if any of this is going to work."
Or it'll only get worse, especially when Thor comes back."

"Who says Thor is coming back?"

He made a gesture with one hand. "He's been down here before, and we're his team now. I'm sure he'll drop by. That's part of why it was a good idea to all move in together in the first place; at least he won't have to go all over, trying to find us."

She was quiet for a long moment and Steve dropped his gaze to his shoes. Staring at him, her brows twitched. "If what is going to work?" she asked delicately, after a few minutes of silence.

"Us," he replied, blinking bemusedly at her. "The team. That's why we're all here."

"Why are you pushing that?" She cocked her head at him, allowing one small foot to drop and rest on the floor. "What does it matter if we're a team off of the field or not?"

Steve shrugged, his fingers fiddling in his lap.

"I've only got one other team to go by," he confessed. "But the Commandos were friends on and off the field, and I know that we couldn't have accomplished half of the things that we did if we hadn't been. It was nice, having those people that you know you can rely on for anything. And maybe," he sighed, hesitating. Natasha sat perfectly still, allowing him to continue if he wanted. Glancing up at her sympathetic face, he sighed again. "Maybe I miss that."

"It sounds nice," she admitted after a few moments of quiet. "It's not how I was raised, so the concept is foreign."

"What about Clint and Coulson?"

She blinked rapidly, taken aback. "Well, I," she stuttered. "They don't really --,"

"They were your team, right?" he pressed, looking at her expectantly. She dithered for a minute more, looking at her toes, before slumping her shoulders in resignation.

"Yes," she murmured. Flicking her eyes up, she offered him a small smile. "You're right."

"I'll try not to let it go to my head," he returned, smiling and looking relaxed for the first time since he'd walked in. He sat for a moment longer, tracing a pattern on her desk with his finger. "How do we help him?"

"Clint is not unused to grief," she began carefully, after some thought. "I think that we support him when he needs it. If he's pushed, he pulls back."

"And we're at square one," Steve murmured.

Natasha shook her head. "I mean literally. When Clint is faced with a confrontation that he doesn't want, he disappears. Being with other people will help."

"Will liquor help?" Steve asked hopefully after a short pause.

Natasha laughed quietly. "Yes, Steve. Liquor will probably help."

"Well, if there's liquor, count me in," Clint said from the doorway.

"Even if it's a team building exercise?"
Clint shrugged an answer to Natasha as he entered the room. He headed towards the bed, but stopped, frowning at the heap of pillows, and sat on the floor in front of her instead. "I can handle anything if you give me enough alcohol."

"I'm going to remember that," Steve warned him with a smile and Clint let out a laugh.

"Let's hope so, Cap. I came up here to tell you that Bruce was looking for you."

Steve nodded, rising from the chair. "That's my cue."

He paused when Clint held up one hand, a credit card held between two fingers, and dropped it in Natasha's lap with a grin. "This morning."

She flipped the card over, raising her brows. "Impressive. I can top it, though."

"Do I want to know?" Steve asked hesitantly.

The assassins met each others' gaze for a moment before they turned to him and simultaneously replied, "No."

"That's great," he muttered, stepping towards the door.

"Yeah, I meant to ask you," Clint said suddenly, causing the soldier to turn back, cocking his head in question. "Do you still remember the song from your USO tour? My cell needs a new ringtone."

Steve glared at the teasing archer as he left, the shorter man chuckling on the floor. "No."

Bruce was in the kitchen with his nose buried in a notebook, a stack of identical volumes and a tablet beside him, but he looked up with a small smile at Steve's approach. "Hello Captain."

"Please, call me Steve." He slid into one of the chairs across from Bruce. "We're not in the field. Clint said that you wanted to see me."

"Yes, I did, Steve." Bruce nodded, pulling one of the notebooks from the stack. Gripping the spine with one hand, he used his other to flip through the pages until he reached what he was looking for. "I found this, and I thought that you might like to have it."

He pulled a thick piece of paper, yellowed with age, from between the pages and slid it across the table. Steve's breath caught in his throat as he pulled it closer, recognizing the image it presented.

The Howling Commandos grinned back at him, their teasing expressions captured perfectly by his own hand with graphite and charcoal. Morita casually sipped at his tankard, leaning back against the trunk that Falsworth sat on, grinning at the detailed antics of Jones and Dernier. Dugan's uproarious laugh was frozen on the page as he handed Howard a flask. Bucky sat at the table with Dugan and Stark, grinning as he dealt a hand of cards. Peggy stood off to the side, shaking her head at the men, but smiling softly all the same.

Steve reached out a shaky hand, his index finger tracing her cheek lightly. Bruce sat quietly watching him as he contemplated the picture.

"Did you know him well?"

Steve glanced up suddenly at Bruce's hushed question, his eyes bright. "Who?"

"Howard Stark," the scientist clarified, setting his book down and leaning forward. "Tony's father."
"Yeah." Steve let out a quick grin, returning his attention to the drawing for a moment. "Yeah, we were friends. He was a good man, if a little flashy, and loyal as the day was long."

"Well, that does sound familiar," Bruce murmured, and looked up to find Steve eyeing him curiously.

"What happened anyway?" Bruce cocked his head in question, one hand gesturing for Steve to elaborate. "Between the two of them?"

"Pepper knows more than I do, so she's really the one to ask."

"I doubt she'll tell me anything. I don't think Stark will either, for that matter."

"Not unless he's hopelessly drunk," Bruce admitted. "And probably not even then."

Steve was silent for a few long minutes. "I don't suppose it matters now anyway," he finally said, leaning back in his chair. "What's done is done."

Bruce smiled. "There's that forties sentimentality again."

"It does tend to crop up," Steve admitted, grinning. "No matter how many times Natasha tells me that I can be too nice of a person."

"Excuse me, Captain Rogers." JARVIS's interruption covered the sound of Bruce's chuckles. "Miss Potts is calling for you."

"Oh, um." Steve rose, looking slightly befuddled. "Okay?"

Bruce smiled kindly and pointed at one of the phone handsets. "Just press 'Talk' and then the number one."

"Thanks." Steve smiled gratefully and followed Bruce's instructions. "Hello?"

"Hey Steve," Pepper greeted warmly. "Just wanted to check in."

"Oh, well, everything is going really well, I think," Steve answered, stepping away from the kitchen and drifting towards the foyer. "Maybe."

Pepper laughed lightly. "So it sounds. Have you planned anything for dinner yet? I'm running late, but I'm going to devour any leftovers you have."

"Well, I've got some chicken in the fridge for a new recipe," Steve said, looking back over his shoulder. "What time do you think you'll be back?"

"Very late," Pepper replied after a pause, sounding tired. "And I probably will be for the next few nights. Go ahead and start dinner. I'll be home as soon as I can."

Rearranging the garage to fit both his and Bruce's new labs had taken a few days longer than he'd planned, but Tony had finally set everything up the way he wanted. The scientist was happily puttering away in his own, unpacking box after box of equipment that Tony had ordered for him.

Bruce had protested the purchase at first, as Tony had known he would, but he'd been easily swayed when Tony had showed him the inventory list and swore that he'd pulverize everything if Bruce didn't use it. Thankfully, Bruce had not chosen to call his bluff and was in the process of setting up his own lab.
Tony dumped the contents of another box into his workbench and began sorting through the odds and ends. He tuned out the rest of the ambient noise and focused on his task for a number of minutes.

"Sir."

Tony's eyes flickered from where he was placing the last of a wrench set into a toolbox. "What?"

"Miss Potts asked me to inform you that dinner was nearly finished. She expects you to attend."


"That is correct, sir."

"Then how does she know that dinner is nearly ready?" Tony asked, his lips curled in question. "And what does she mean, she expects me to attend?"

"I believe Miss Potts called Captain Rogers from the Tower and requested a status update. He informed her that the evening meal was nearly completed, and she, in turn, informed me of her desire to have you attend."

"That," Tony commented lightly, "was much more civil than I had been expecting."

"I could play back the message she left you."

Tony snorted. "No thanks. Besides, I should probably get up there."

"Feeling a bit peckish, sir?"

Tony stood and stretched, groaning as the popping of his vertebrae echoed loudly. "Now that you mention it, yes. And I should probably lay down the ground rules of my lab with the others."

"It is usually best to get those out of the way. I'm sure you wouldn't appreciate the company of your new houseguests."

"Careful," Tony warned, opening the door and heading upstairs. "I have no problem reprogramming you."

"I am shaking in terror, sir. Truly."

Muttering beneath his breath at insubordinate and snarky bits of tech, Tony poked his head into Bruce's lab.

"Hey." The scientist glanced up from a box, slightly startled at the intrusion, and Tony smirked lightly at the blank look on Bruce's face. "Dinner."

Bruce adjusted his glasses for a moment and blinked. "I think I let time get away from me," he said sheepishly. "Thanks for the reminder."

"Well, don't count on it all the time," Tony advised, waiting for Bruce to pick his way through the maze of boxes and reach Tony's side. "I only knew about it because Pepper left me a note with JARVIS."

"Handy, that," Bruce murmured with a smile.

Tony chuckled as they climbed the stairs to the sub-basement, making their way past the guest rooms and laundry to the stairs to the first floor. The scent of expertly seasoned chicken greeted them as
they opened the door into the den.

Clint and Natasha were already seated at the overflowing kitchen table when they arrived. Clint nodded a greeting at the pair when they slid into seats as Natasha spoke softly with Steve. The soldier set the last platter on the table and any attempts at conversation ended.

When the plates were cleared and compliments given, Tony slapped a piece of paper on the table. Clint peered at it over his empty plate and interrupted Tony. "What the hell is that?"

Tony glared at him. "Paper."

"I thought that was a foreign object for you," Natasha murmured into her glass, hiding a smirk when Tony turned his scowl in her direction.

"What did you need to tell us?" Steve asked with a slight tone of exasperation, effectively ending any further sniping.

With a pointed look at the assassins, Tony cleared his throat and gestured at the paper. "This is a list of the lab ground rules."

"You have rules?"

Natasha rolled her eyes at Clint, picking up his glass and trading it for her empty one. "Of course he has rules," she scolded lightly. She flicked her eyes at Tony. "Do we all get pass codes too?"

"I will get to that, if you will all shut up for a second," he replied testily. Steve pulled the paper closer to him, his brow furrowed in concentration as he read through the list. Tony continued. "The lab is pass code protected. Each person has their own personal code that is matched to your index fingerprint."

"I'm almost curious as to how he got those," Clint muttered, meeting Tony's resultant glare with unapologetic eyes.

"So," Tony said. "If your code isn't working, I've probably locked you out for a reason. There is no override for that situation."

"Yes there is," Natasha murmured in Clint's ear. "And he probably hasn't touched the vents."

The billionaire narrowed his eyes at the pair. "What are you whispering about?"

"None of your business," she replied lightly, sipping at her glass.

Tony glowered at her for a few moments, his glare deepening as she casually ignored him. Bruce finally coughed lightly to break the tension and Tony returned his gaze to the sheet of rules. "There is also a full body and retinal scan that must be passed in order to enter the lab at each entrance."

"If you borrow something, put it back exactly where you found it. If you're down there, you must be useful; I don't have time for chitchat. And absolutely no one touches the music."

"Can you really touch music?" Natasha mused quietly to Clint, who shrugged.

"If you're on acid, probably," he mumbled, reaching for her glass and ignoring the confused look Steve gave him.

Tony raised an eyebrow in their direction. "Are you finished?"
"If I say yes, are you going to shut up?" Natasha asked silkily, propping her chin on her hand. Bruce nervously adjusted his glasses, eyeing Tony.

"At this point," the billionaire commented. "I'll probably talk myself hoarse just to piss you off."

The redhead smirked lightly, but she flicked her gaze in Steve's direction at a slight shake of his head. He gave her a pleading look and she sighed, rising. "It's nice to know you haven't completely changed, Stark."

He waited until she was nearly to the stairs and well removed from the conversation before he delivered his parting shot, giving in to the urge to have the final say. "I'm glad you agree."

"Is there going to be a list of codes somewhere?" Steve interjected, if only to halt Tony's retort to the roll of Clint's eyes.

"No," Tony said decisively, accepting the change of topic and sitting up straight. "I'll tell you what your code is individually. Security reasons, of course."

Steve frowned lightly, a furrow appearing between his brows. "Is all this really necessary?"

"It is to me," Tony replied, his voice flat. "If you'll all excuse me, I've still got a few things to take care of downstairs."

Standing, he quickly left the table and disappeared down into the labs. Steve heaved a sigh, rubbing a hand across his eyes. The soft click of the patio door alerted him to Clint's departure, and he raised his head to find Bruce staring curiously towards the backyard. Placing his palms flat on the table, Steve rose and Bruce's attention shifted.

"Time to do the dishes, I think," the soldier muttered to himself, gathering plates towards himself.

Bruce held out his hand abruptly. "Let me help," he entreated, trying not to feel guilt at the surprise on Steve's face. "You seem to be the only one doing any housework around here. It's time you had some help."

"Thank you," Steve replied sincerely. Reaching into one of the lower cabinets, he pulled out a handful of plastic containers and began storing the leftovers. Bruce carried a stack of plates to the sink, turning the tap on to rinse them before loading them into the dishwasher. Steve watched him fill the racks with a vaguely annoyed wrinkling of his nose. "I think there are some things that I'll never quite get used to."

Bruce turned to him, raising his brows in question and glancing back down at the machine. "Like this?" he asked, gesturing with a dripping plate.

Steve nodded, offering the scientist a wry smile.

"Are you?" The question sliced through the silence abruptly after long moments. Steve blinked confusedly at Bruce for a moment, forcing the scientist to clarify. "Getting used to things, I mean."

Recalling their conversation in the dark of the Tower, Steve sighed lightly. "I suppose."

"If we're going to be honest, though," he continued after some minutes. "Sometimes, I don't think I'll ever really adjust completely."

"I'm sure it will take time," Bruce murmured, wincing even as he did so with the awareness that the platitude would fall flat. The look Steve shot him indicated that he felt the same way and Bruce felt a
sudden need to soothe any ruffled feathers. He dried his hands on a towel, leaning against the counter. "I'm sorry if I'm being offensive. My sense of tact is a little out of practice. It's been a while since I've used it."

Steve smiled genuinely, accepting the offered apology for what it was meant to be. "It's alright," he assured. "There wasn't room for hurt feelings in the war. We had too many other things to worry about."

"I'd wager."

They fell into a comfortable silence as they worked, only breaking when Bruce looked up to find Pepper standing at the downstairs entrance.

"You look exhausted," he commented lightly, drawing Steve's attention.

Pepper glared at him, dropping her briefcase by the bar to her right. "Thanks for the compliment, Banner," she groused, walking over and sliding into a chair.

Bruce held out his hands in surrender, having the grace to look apologetic. "I'm just stating the obvious. I thought women liked that."

"Remind me to teach you how to romance a woman, Bruce," Pepper sniped, and then sighed. "I'm sorry. I am very tired, and that's no reason for me to snap at you."

"That's fine," Steve assured her, opening the refrigerator and pulling out the containers of leftovers. "I think it's understandable that you're a little overworked, right Bruce?"

"Of course," the scientist agreed, still looking sheepish. "Like I just told Steve, my tact is a bit rusty."

"That's alright," she replied as Steve fixed her a plate. "My social interactions are a bit rusty today."

"We all have days," Bruce murmured, pouring her a glass of water. Steve popped the plate in the microwave and paused. Bruce turned at the noise and smiled. "Try two minutes."

"Thanks." The soldier hesitantly punched the correct buttons on the machine and turned around when it the turntable started. "Anything you want to talk about?"

Pepper shook her head, taking a sip of water. "It's nothing to concern yourself with."

"Well, if we can do anything, or you need anything, we can help," Steve offered, removing the plate from the microwave and setting it in front of her with a set of silverware.

"Am I part of your team now, too?" She smiled at him, picking up her fork.

Steve leaned back against the counter with crossed arms, glancing down at his shoes. "Nat?"

"She called me this afternoon, after you talked to her," Pepper said slowly. "She asked for my help."

Bruce watched the exchange curiously, dropping into the seat at the end of the table. Steve smiled at Pepper. "I think, at this point, I'm willing to take all the help I can get."

Pepper promised Steve her help and she had been sincere, but work in the city kept her busy and away from the mansion. In her absence, she charged Bruce with helping the team in her stead.

"How in the hell am I supposed to do that?"
She laughed lightly and he stared at his phone's receiver. "Trust me, Bruce, the opportunity will present itself."

"You sound confident about that," he replied dubiously.

"Of course, I am. I know him."

He was contemplating the conversation when Tony barged through the break room that separated their labs.

"What do you think?"

Bruce jumped slightly in his chair and adjusted his glasses to cover his surprise. "What do I think about what?"

"This." Tony stepped forward, an electric blue hologram bursting into existence around them. "Plans for the new training room."

"You're building a training room?"

The billionaire frowned at Bruce's skeptical tone. "I do nice things on occasion."

"Pepper told you to, didn't she?"

Tony scowled at Bruce's insight and threw himself into an empty chair, his face falling slightly. "She's been different since we removed Extremis."

"Still not that kind of doctor," Bruce muttered, holding out his hands in supplication at Tony's black glare. "But it makes sense that she'd be feeling that way. It's difficult for some to let go of that kind of power and return to a normal life."

"Pepper isn't like that," Tony said lowly and Bruce sighed.

"That's not what I meant," he tried to explain. "For a split second, with Extremis, she wasn't your greatest weakness. She could take care of herself. For her, it's not about power. It's about not being a burden to you."

Tony was silent for long enough that Bruce began to worry, before he suddenly gave Bruce a grin that didn't quite reach his eyes. "I thought you weren't that kind of doctor."

Bruce snorted, swiveling in his chair to pick up a tablet. "Don't get used to it," he advised. "The building looks fine, by the way."

"Of course it does," Tony agreed swiftly, as Bruce leaned forward, peering at his chest. "I designed it. What are you doing?"

The scientist pointed to a damp patch on Tony's shirt that was slowly spreading over the Metallica emblem. "What is that?"

Tony glanced down at his shirt and froze. "Nothing."

"Tony," Bruce began in a leading tone.

"Swear you won't tell anyone."

Bruce raised an eyebrow at his friend, clasping his hands and resting his elbows on his knees. "This
is not how I pictured this conversation progressing," he murmured.

"Admittedly, I hadn't planned on saying anything," Tony hedged, sounding irritated. "But I think I'm going to need your help for this next part."

Beyond curious, Bruce sat back in his chair and watched as Tony stripped his shirt over his head to reveal a pressure bandage wrapped around his chest. There was a sinking feeling in the pit of Bruce's stomach as Tony unhooked the clasps and began to unwind the binding. It pooled at his feet and Tony hissed lightly as it caught on a small tube that poked out from beneath the square of white gauze that stretched from armpit to armpit. A small drop of milky, yellow fluid dripped from the open end and slid down his skin.

"Please tell me that is not what I think it is."

Tony had the audacity to roll his eyes. "You're not a psychiatrist and I'm not a psychic."

"Tony."

The billionaire paused, taking a moment to search Bruce's irises for the barest hint of green, and the latter sighed, removing his glasses to rub at the bridge of his nose. Tony fiddled with the leaking tube and Bruce swatted his hand away.

"Ow."

"That did not actually hurt, you big baby," Bruce muttered, slowly reaching forward to gently pull at the tape holding the white bandage down. Peeling it back just enough to see, he bit back on a curse. "Damn it, Tony."

"It's not that bad," the billionaire insisted, hastening to reapply the tape. "Really."

"Your chest is bright red and leaking pus like a sieve," Bruce replied flatly, struggling to control The Other Guy in the back of his brain. "JARVIS, please scan the wound and image match it to pictures of infections."

"Scanning now, Doctor Banner," JARVIS intoned over Tony's objections. The billionaire settled for glaring halfheartedly at Bruce.

Bruce sighed, pressing hard against his temples. "Why haven't you fixed this?"

"There's nothing to fix," Tony insisted. "There was a whole surgical team to insert the bone plug. That was fixing it."

"That's not what I meant," Bruce interjected softly, fixing his friend with a knowing look as he felt The Other Guy settle unhappily. "You have access to Extremis. Why not use it?"

Tony's face shuttered and he placed one hand unconsciously over the wound in his chest. "I don't trust tech that I didn't create."

"You've seen what it can do," Bruce insisted and Tony's eyes narrowed.

"Yes," he murmured. "I have."

Bruce paused for a moment as he realized what Tony meant, and sighed. He met Tony's wary eyes and smiled, nodding his head.

"Based on image patterns, it does appear that Mister Stark's wound is infected. It is recommended
that he visit a doctor, and if he refuses, then an increased dosage of anti-rejection medication is an acceptable alternative until Miss Potts convinces him to visit a hospital."

"Did you hear that? Keep that in mind," Bruce muttered as he opened an alcohol swab and began cleaning the area around Tony's drainage tube. "And be careful with this thing."

Tony watched him for a moment, and then quirked his lips into the semblance of a smile. "Who's exposed now?"

Bruce let out a surprised laugh despite himself and reached for the first aid kit that sat beneath his desk. Setting it on top of a pile of papers, he unlatched the lid and began rooting through it for supplies.

"Let's get this fixed up then, hm? And I'm taking a blood sample, with or without your permission."

Tony grumbled, but sat relatively still under Bruce's ministrations. Securing the drainage tube and making sure that the wound was healing as properly as possible took less time than Bruce wanted and, when he was finished, Tony bolted from the lab for a fresh shirt.

Suddenly feeling his age, Bruce dropped his face into his hands, pressing his fingers into his temples and trying to breathe calmly. He had no idea how long he sat there, when there was a soft knock at the door. Glancing up, he was surprised to see Steve hovering uncomfortably in the entry. Taking pity on the younger man, Bruce motioned Steve forward.

"Come on in," he entreated. "What can I do for you?"

The soldier shrugged, a nervous gesture, and Bruce felt his curiosity flame. "I was just looking for a quiet place. Well," Steve admitted, fidgeting. "Maybe less of a quiet place and more of some quiet company."

Bruce smiled slightly, the edges of his mouth turning up. "Are the assassins not good company?"

"Clint disappeared after breakfast and Natasha is at the range with her throwing knives," Steve informed him with a small grin before sobering. "In the war, you were never alone. There was always someone around."

"I understand," Bruce interjected softly, and Steve looked relieved that he didn't have to continue his thought process. Bruce gestured to the squashy sofa in the corner. "The couch is open."

Smiling shyly, Steve picked his way around stacks of notebooks and loose papers, settling himself on the cushions. Bruce watched him for a moment as he leaned back into the corner of the couch and flipped his book open.

"The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy?"

Steve glanced up at Bruce's amused question, flicking his gaze to the spine of his book for a moment in confusion. "Yeah," he muttered, perplexed. "Is it not a good book?"

Bruce chuckled, shifting on his feet. "No, it's a great book," he admitted. "I didn't really think it was your style."

"Oh." The soldier shrugged, marking his place in the book with a fingertip. "I liked science fiction, as a kid. There wasn't a lot of it, by any means, but I was constantly checking Jules Verne and H. G. Wells novels out from the library."
Bruce smiled. "You learn something new every day," he murmured. Nodding at the novel, he readjusted his glasses on the bridge of his nose. "When you're finished with that, I recommend Isaac Asimov."

"I've read some of his short stories," Steve informed him, leaning forward with a glint in his eye. "Did he write a lot more?"

"Tons," Bruce assured him, ignoring his lingering reservations about his interaction with Tony and turning back to the herculean task of organizing the contents of his lab. Steve leaned back into the cushions, eventually twisting to stretch his legs along the length of the couch and recline fully.

The two men went about their individual tasks wordlessly, comfortable in the hushed companionship, until the sound of Tony's voice burst through the breezeway that separated the labs.

"Banner!"

Bruce and Steve looked up at the call, the latter quickly returning to his novel when it was clear that he wasn't required. Tony barged again into Bruce's side of the lab with aplomb, stopping short when he caught sight of Steve on the couch.

Setting the book he was holding on the shelf, Bruce gently prodded the billionaire after a moment's pause. "Did you need something?"

"I have an equation I'd like you to look at," Tony answered, his eyes still on the soldier in the corner. "It's on my work top."

"Alright," Bruce said equably, standing. "Let's go."

Shooing the other man, Bruce trailed Tony through the break room and into his lab. Tony led him to his desk, chattering incessantly about everything and nothing, until Bruce couldn't stand it.

"What is this?"

"What is what?"

Bruce gestured loosely at him. "This. You were fine after I patched you up, and now you're tighter than a bow string. What's bothering you?"

Tony blinked, taken aback. "Nothing is bothering me. Why should anything be bothering me? I'm not bothered, not one bit."

Bruce took a moment to scrutinize the billionaire, his arms folded across his chest as he watched his friend fiddle with various pieces of the equation on his table top.

"It's Steve, isn't it?"

Tony tensed for a nanosecond, but relaxed almost immediately. "Why would you say that?"

"Because you were fine until a minute ago, when you saw Steve in my lab." Bruce watched his friend carefully, noticing the way that the tendons in Tony's neck twitched when he mentioned the Captain. Bruce sighed. "You still hate him."

"I don't hate him," Tony snapped, turning away from Bruce. "It's an authority thing. Just ask Pepper."

Bruce continued to gaze skeptically at him as Tony busied himself with various models floating
across the desktop. "I don't believe you," he said decisively, after a moment of watching Tony fidget.

The billionaire stared at him incredulously for a moment, his jaw slack. Gathering himself, he narrowed his eyes at Bruce. "That doesn't make it any less true."

"I'm not trying to make you angry," Bruce murmured. "But this has got to stop."

"I don't know what you mean," Tony deflected, returning his attention to his project and studiously avoiding Bruce's searching gaze. Bruce pursed his lips after a moment, indecisive, and then moved around the desk to stand in front of him.

"You pushed me on the helicarrier, when I didn't want to talk about the Other Guy," he said finally, noting the way that Tony stilled. "And it helped me see that I could be part of the team. So I'm going to push you on this."

Tony snorted, the sound lacking amusement. "What is it with everyone and this team thing? You and Pepper both."

"You don't want to be part of a team?" Bruce cocked his head at his friend.

Tony glared at him from beneath his lashes. "Why should I? Teams consist of people, and people just get in the way or betray you."

"That's not always the case," Bruce admonished gently. "And that explanation, while very informative, has nothing to do with why you're avoiding Steve like the plague."

"He rubs me the wrong way," Tony sniffed lightly, still refusing to meet Bruce's eyes. "All authority and orders and acting like an old codger."

When his proclamation was met with silence, he glanced up, surprised to find Bruce gaping at him. "He's just a kid!"

Tony blinked. "What?"

Bruce turned away from the desk, running one hand through his hair. Glancing back over his shoulder, he scrutinized Tony. "You really don't see, do you?"

"Is this one of those things that you're not going to tell me, because it'll mean more if I figure it out for myself?" Tony asked, his voice tinged with derision.

"No," Bruce murmured, suddenly feeling that there was a deeper driving force behind Tony's actions than the billionaire was willing to share. "Just think about it logically. Steve was a soldier, yes, but he only saw battle for about a couple of months before he was frozen. And he's far from what he knew as home."

"Everyone's been far from home at one point or another," Tony countered, liking the turn of the conversation less and less.

Bruce gave him a look that was half smirk and half sympathy. "Please remind me how you handled things when you were far from home, in Afghanistan." Tony silently demurred, uneasy. "Considering Steve hasn't blown anything up yet, I'd say he's doing fairly well."

"Seeing that we're friends," Tony began lightly after a moment's pause. "I'll think about what you said. About team-type things."
Bruce smiled, recognizing the sentiment for the olive branch and diversion that it was. "I'm not asking you to be his best friend," the scientist murmured as he headed back to his lab. "I'm just asking you to give him a chance."

"Because he deserves it?" Tony briefly looked like he wanted to take the words back, but his expression settled into something more confident after a moment.

"Don't we all?" Bruce asked softly, one hand lingering on the doorjamb. "We're here, aren't we?"

To be continued in Chapter Four.
"You must remember, family is often born of blood, but it doesn't depend on blood. Nor is it exclusive of friendship. Family members can be your best friends, you know. And best friends, whether or not they are related to you, can be your family."

— Trenton Lee Stewart, *The Mysterious Benedict Society*

"The most important thing in life is your family. There are days you love them, and others you don't, but in the end they're the people you always come home to. Sometimes it's the family you're born into, and sometimes it's the one you make for yourself."

— Candice Bergen, *Sex and the City*

Chapter Four

No one really knew who started the trend of emptying the contents of their pockets onto the counter of the bar, although all speculation pointed to Clint. Where the bar been empty one day, the next it held the archer's cellphone, an old brick of a Nokia. Soon his customary wad of cash and Natasha's wallet found a place by the phone, then the keys to the Acura. Natasha's sleek smartphone and a small blade soon followed, along with a little notebook and a pen from Bruce. Steve's wallet and loose change quickly joined the pile, his motorcycle keys and state–of–the–art cellphone in a neat stack.

It wasn't an issue with Tony, per se. He had offered his home to the Avengers and it had been sincere. In retrospect, he thought as he stared at the mess on top of his bar, he had not actually expected their arrival to affect his routine in any way.

Finding no place to set the bottle of scotch and cut glass tumbler he'd already gotten out, he pensively contemplated the haphazard clutter and, with one decisive motion, swept the lot of it to the floor. Hitching himself onto the single barstool behind the counter, Tony poured himself three fingers of scotch and sighed happily.

He'd expected to be alone for quite some time in the early hours of the morning, but Steve soon padded down the stairs and into the kitchen. Tony watched the soldier rifle through the cabinets for a moment, sipping at the golden liquid with Bruce's chastisement still ringing in his ears.

"The mugs are in the dishwasher," he offered, startling Steve into a defensive position. The billionaire smirked lightly. "Pepper collected the ones in my lab and cleaned them after you went to bed."

"Oh." Steve looked remarkably stunned, blinking at Tony as if he were a ghost. "Thanks."

Turning, he pulled a clean mug from the top rack and started the coffee maker. A soft beep reached Tony's ears and Steve left the percolating machine to join the billionaire. Bracing one hand against the bar counter, he leaned down and began gathering the miscellaneous items on the floor.

Carefully, Steve stacked everything in organized piles at the end of the bar. Tony watched silently as he picked up his phone and stared at the cracked screen. His brow furrowed as he pressed the power
button and nothing happened.

Tony swallowed another sip. "I'm sorry I broke your phone."

"It's alright," Steve assured him with a shrug, placing the broken phone beneath his wallet. "I didn't really know how to work it anyway."

Stepping back into the kitchen, he poured himself a cup of coffee and returned. Steve glanced hesitantly at Tony, visibly wavering. "May I ask why you're up this late?"

"You can," Tony replied, splashing another half inch of scotch into his glass. "Doesn't mean I'll answer."

The soldier seemed to take that in stride, almost as if he were expecting the terse reply. Tony sighed, setting his tumbler on the marble counter with a clink.

"These are my normal hours. I wake up late and stay up later. Your breakfast is my normal dinnertime."

"Maybe I should make you a plate of dinner's leftovers in the morning instead," Steve teased, smiling slightly.

"It'd be more appropriate." Tony snorted. He eyed the younger man for a moment. "What are you doing up this late? You looked pretty out of it a minute ago."

Steve's face shuttered and he drank some coffee to stall. "It was nothing."

Tony knew that he should leave it alone, could hear Bruce's voice echoing in his ears until the desperate need to know overwhelmed any advice that the Bruce voice was whispering. He knew Steve could tell what was coming as he shifted from relaxed into cocksure, and the soldier stiffened in response.

"Didn't look like nothing to me," Tony said, grinning.

"Give it a rest, Stark. Please"

Tony gave Steve his most guileless look, ignoring the pleading tone. "You know what? I think I'll rest when you rest, O Captain, my Captain."

Steve breathed deeply, trying to ease the tension in his muscles. "Well, I sleep when I need to, which isn't much, thanks to the serum."

"So, you don't need to right now," Tony finished, glancing pointedly at the analog clock that sat on the bar, a contraption Pepper had insisted on buying. "Because you have circles under your eyes. That means you need sleep."

Steve closed his eyes. "This line of questioning isn't going to stop, is it?"

"It's doubtful," Tony admitted. "Not until I get what I want, which is to know why you looked like a particularly dimwitted zombie when you got down here."

The soldier took another calming breath. "If I just go to my room without answering the question, will that satisfy you?"

"I'm not sure how I feel about you caring about my satisfaction, Captain." The words slid off his tongue effortlessly. "I don't swing that way."
That comment seemed enough to push Steve over the edge. He ran a hand down his face tiredly, clearly giving up. "Good night, Mister Stark."

"You have no sense of humor," Tony complained flippantly as Steve stepped away, recognizing his mistake and somewhat trying to salvage what remained of the conversation and his relationship with the Captain. Steve paused mid-stride.

"I do when it counts," he retorted slowly over his shoulder, eyes slightly narrowed. The image was so familiar, so like Howard used to look sometimes, that Tony's inner child lashed out, unthinkingly. "Whatever, Liberty Bell." Tony waved him off and Steve snapped.

"Could you, for one minute, pull your head out of your ass and put yourself in my shoes?" The Captain's tone and language gave Tony pause and for the first time, he wondered if he'd finally pushed just a smidgeon too hard and sent the figurative envelope over the edge.

"I crashed a plane full of bombs into the Arctic in nineteen forty-five, in the middle of the greatest war I knew. I wake up in a badly done mock up seventy years later, after what seems like days. All of my friends are dead. I know no one in the city I called home and the only people I've met are agents whom I have no choice but to trust because I am helpless in that crazy world out there. I am thrust back into a war over the most dangerous thing I have ever seen that I thought was lost and the only person with the remotest connection to anything that I once knew treats my situation like a bad joke. So please, Mister Stark, tell me how funny this all is."

The room was pin-drop silent. Steve slowly inclined his head in Tony's direction, the motion vaguely mocking. "If you'll excuse me, I think I'll head upstairs now."

Tony watched his retreating back with no small amount of shock and a growing sense of guilt. Sleep now more elusive than ever, he retreated back downstairs to his lab.

Tony hadn't emerged from the lab for three days, and Steve was beginning to worry. Pepper had started working a different schedule, three days on at Stark Tower and four days off at the mansion, which meant that she wasn't around to check on Tony. Steve was beginning to feel desperate enough to ask Natasha about it after dinner.

She chuckled, leading him away from the kitchen where Clint was washing up. "Steve, he'll be fine as long as someone supplies him with sandwiches, which we are doing. This is perfectly normal for Stark."

"Are you sure?" Steve was pressing, he knew, but he was starting to feel guilty for snapping at Tony the other night. She raised an eyebrow at him.

"Would you like to call Pepper and ask her opinion?"

Steve blushed. "It's not that I don't trust you," he assured her. She waved his explanations away.

"I understand," she murmured, handing him the house phone. "Just press and hold five."

Pepper picked up on the second ring and listened patiently while Steve explained the situation.

"Don't worry about him, Steve," she replied gently. "Tony gets like this sometimes. He's probably just lost in some project and he'll come out when the stench of having forgotten to shower gets to him. Is Natasha still there?"
Steve handed the phone to the redhead, aware that he was being dismissed. Deciding that Bruce would be more reasonable than the women, Steve cornered him on the closed-in patio where he was reading the Journal of Medicinal Chemistry in the evening light. "Can I talk to you for a second, Doctor Banner?"

Bruce frowned slightly. "Why do you keep calling me Doctor Banner?"

Steve raised a brow and Bruce had the fleeting idea that he'd been spending far too much time around Natasha. "That is your name, right?"

The soldier's reply hinted at sarcasm and Bruce corrected himself. Definitely spending too much time around Natasha.

"That was pretty quick reply," Steve commented after a moment of silence, taking a seat next to Bruce. "I'd wager you've been thinking about it for a few days." Bruce nodded, somewhat sheepish. Steve mulled that for a minute. "Does it bother you?"

"A bit, yeah," Bruce admitted, fiddling with his papers and ignoring Steve's questioning gaze. "You call everyone else by their first names. And I'm not being petulant about it," he added.

"Just curious?" Steve smiled slightly at Bruce's assent. "Clint and I were both soldiers, so there's camaraderie there." Bruce nodded in understanding. "I think Natasha just might punch me if I called her ma'am again." He quirked his lips and Bruce grinned back. "Pepper fussed at me and Stark is Stark."

"And me?" Steve was quiet for a minute.

"It's a sign of respect," he said finally. "Peggy told me once about the process to get a doctorate, how hard Doctor Erskine had to work, and that the title of doctor was just as meaningful as the rank of colonel. It just means I respect you."

Bruce shifted, unprepared for an answer that deep. "But we're not friends."

Steve's eyes shot to his face. "That's not what I meant," he protested, and Bruce felt just a little guilty. But, he was tired and stressed and he just wanted to know that someone in the mansion besides Tony wasn't concerned that the Other Guy was half a minute away from an appearance. Clint and Natasha's subtle avoidance was starting to take a toll.

"I respect Tony, but I don't call him Mister Stark," Bruce pointed out. "Neither do you."

The other man shifted contritely and everything clicked. Sitting back, he breathed, "You don't respect him."

"It's not that," Steve's voice was definitive. "I certainly respect him for what he did in Midtown. There's no question about that. But he's so —,"

"Tony," Bruce interjected wryly. Steve raked a hand through his hair.

"I know it's wrong. But he looks just like Howard and he sometimes sounds like Howard too, and then I actually listen to him and it's frustrating, because it seems like he can't take anything seriously."

Bruce leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Tony is not his father," he mentioned gently. "And he won't take it well if you suggest anything of the kind."

"I know that." Steve huffed, frowning. "I'm from the forties. I'm not stupid."
Steve's rejoinder was so uncharacteristic and unexpected that Bruce simply gaped at him for a second before erupting into surprised chuckles.

"Noted, Captain," he said, still grinning.

Steve smiled genuinely back. "It's still Steve, Bruce."

Bruce bit back the overwhelming warmth that suddenly flamed and smiled.

"You got it." He leaned back, relaxing into his chair. "As for Tony, just let it play out. He's temperamental."

"I'd noticed," Steve said dryly.

They lapsed into a comfortable silence as the sun set. Checking his watch, Bruce stood. "Time for bed, Steve," he commented, nudging the younger man's shoulder. The soldier stood and followed Bruce upstairs, but didn't sleep.

Instead, Steve sat at his desk and pulled out his sketchpad and pencils. They were the few personal effects that had survived the interim years, even if the pages were yellowing and just a bit brittle. Setting his pencil to the paper, Steve relished the familiar glide of the graphite and lost himself in his sketches.

It was closing in on four in the morning when Tony stumbled back upstairs. The faint glow coming from the crack beneath Steve's door gave him pause. His feet shuffled to the entry, and he intended to just listen to see if everything was alright, but he misjudged the distance in his sleep-deprived state, bumping into the frame.

"Come on in," Steve called softly. Cursing his own body beneath his breath, Tony swung the door open and leaned against the doorjamb. Steve looked up from his book with wide eyes, sooty streaks marring his cheeks. "Oh, hey Stark. Is everything okay?"

"You're awake."

Steve cocked his head. "Yeah," he said slowly. "So are you."

"I have an excuse," Tony shifted, scrubbing at his eyes with one hand. When he trailed off and didn't continue, Steve set his charcoal down and prompted him.

"Which is?"

"Working. Working on more legitimate things than scribbling on some paper."

Steve tensed, and then forcibly relaxed his muscles. "Well, I'm glad that you're getting something productive done."

Tony sighed, running a hand through his already disheveled hair. "Fuck," he breathed. "I didn't mean it like that."

Steve held up a hand. "I know. It's fine. I get very defensive when I'm tired."

"You and me both, Spangles."

There was a pause and Steve glanced back down at his sketch. Frowning at it, he picked up his charcoal again and added a few bold strokes. Tony watched Steve's hands trace along the page for a few moments, the movements hypnotizing him somewhat. Shaking himself out of his stupor, he
stepped forward and cocked his head, curious.

"Why do you draw?"

"It's calming," Steve murmured inattentively.

"Well, you know what calms me down?" Steve seemed to recognize that the question was rhetorical, glancing up at the billionaire. Tony slapped him on the back. "Liquor."

He headed out of the room, clearly expecting to be followed. Sighing softly, Steve picked up his supplies and trailed the other man to the bar. Tony poured something clearly old and clearly gold into a cut crystal tumbler before meandering out to the back patio. Eyeing the decanter, Steve brought it along and set it beside the chair he took next to Tony.

If there was one thing that the war had taught him, it was patience. So he flipped his sketchbook open and continued to work as Tony sipped his drink. It was silent long enough for Steve to finish his sketch in the low light and begin another, but Tony was Tony. He couldn't be quiet forever.

"He talked about you, you know." The words pierced the stillness that had settled over the two men. Hazarding a glance, Steve watched Tony inspect the glass in his hand. Tipping it back, he emptied it.

"I'm not surprised," Steve replied, adding some shading to his sketch with one hand and holding out the decanter with the other. Tony looked sharply at him, clearly inquiring about Steve's statement and not the fact that he'd brought the liquor out with them. Steve smiled a little, not bothering to look up from his sketchbook. "Howard wasn't Bucky, by any means, but he was still my friend. I knew him well enough to know that he'd mention me in passing."

"Well, that's better than I knew him, I suppose," Tony sniped, envy tingeing his voice as he snatched the container from Steve's hand. "I don't even know what happened to change him."

"The Manhattan Project," Steve murmured absently. Tony turned to face him fully, eyes flashing, and was grimly satisfied when Steve hesitantly met his gaze. "It's only a guess, but I'd wager that's what it was. Your father worked on it."

"I know that," Tony nearly snapped. "But he made weapons for most of his life. Why would that project affect him?"

Steve blinked blue eyes at him. "Howard may have made weapons, but he wasn't a killer. He never saw what they did. He just made them."

When Tony simply stared at him, Steve set his sketchbook in his lap and continued. "Howard always said that his job was to make sure that we didn't get ourselves killed. But the atomic bomb, that was calculated, deliberate. Intended to wipe whole cities off the map. It was recorded, and shown to the people. I can see how that could eventually destroy a man, the knowledge that he was part of that cause."

"Maybe," Tony hedged.

Steve arched his eyebrow, consciously returning his attention to his sketch and not looking at the other man. "And what exactly did you do in Afghanistan, when you found out what people were doing with your weapons?"

Tony forewent refilling his glass and drank deeply from the decanter. "Shut up."

Steve seemed to recognize that the tone of the conversation had shifted somehow, so he kept quiet,
closing his book and putting his pencils back in their case. Tony took another few drinks and the
silence stretched into the night before he spoke.

"Time to hit the hay, wouldn't you think, Cap?"

Steve sighed to himself. "Sure, Tony."

There was an undecipherable glance from the billionaire that neither man chose to comment on, but
the change in moniker did not go unnoticed.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you never slept," Natasha commented lightly as she meandered
around the kitchen before sliding into a seat at the table.

Steve rolled his eyes, the motion surprising. "Don't you start, too. Tony has already been down that
road."

"Tony?" She raised an eyebrow at him as he poured a cup of coffee and set it in front of her. He sent
her a quelling glance and she bit her tongue, simply offering him a half–smile. "What's for
breakfast?"

"I thought I'd try my hand at a traditional Southern meal," he answered, reaching into the refrigerator.
When she stared at him, silently requesting more information, he clarified, "Biscuits and gravy and
the like."

When he turned back around, she was wrinkling her nose at him, the expression part confusion and
part disgust. "What exactly is biscuits and gravy?"

"It's exactly what it sounds like," he replied with amusement. "Just, trust me. It tastes good."

She hummed lightly, watching him knead dough and combine the gravy wordlessly. The biscuits
had been cut out and placed in the oven when she spoke again. "I don't trust the Hulk."

He paused, blinking at her. "That was out of the blue."

"Not really," she corrected, smirking a bit at the dumbfounded look on his face. "You told me to trust
you, which got me thinking about who I didn't trust, and at the top of that list is the Hulk."

"But not Bruce?"

She rolled her eyes. "Bruce himself is harmless. He's a nice guy."

"Is that why you've been hiding out in the vents above his lab?" Steve asked, his eyes twinkling.

She scowled at him. "How the hell did you notice me?"

He laughed aloud. "You fell asleep the other day. I heard you move and finally looked up."

"I'm getting soft," she muttered to herself, curling around her cup. "Damned Americans."

"I'll try not to take offense to that," he murmured, offering her a teasing smile as Bruce stepped into
the kitchen and peeked over his shoulder. He seemed not to have heard their conversation, and Steve
gave Natasha a glance that indicated they'd be speaking more on the subject later.

"Biscuits and gravy?" Steve nodded. "Fantastic. There was a place at Culver that had great gravy.
Let's see how yours holds up."
"I think that Mrs. Barnes's gravy is going to taste just fine, Bruce," Steve assured, adding another few grinds of pepper to the skillet. He pulled the biscuits from the oven. "Nat, you ready?"

"For this culinary disaster?" she asked mockingly, placing her napkin in her lap. "Absolutely."

Bruce chuckled as Steve served her up a plate of piping hot biscuits smothered in steaming sausage gravy. Her nose wrinkled with slight distaste as he set the dish in front of her with a soft clink.

He rolled his eyes at her. "Just try it. Bruce, do you want me to fix you a plate?"

"I'll get it," the scientist murmured.

Steve made his own breakfast and sat in his customary chair. He eyed Natasha in her usual place at the far corner and then Bruce's to his left. Sliding down in his seat, he hooked one bare foot around the leg of Natasha's chair.

She froze momentarily and glanced up at him, one brow rising into her hairline. He gave her a reassuring smile and applied pressure to the chair, scooting her towards Bruce's place. She narrowed her eyes at him in rebuke, to no avail. He widened his grin, unrepentant, as Bruce sat in his normal place. The scientist flicked his gaze between the two, ultimately deciding to ignore them and dig into his meal.

"This is amazing," he muttered, wiping his finger at a stray drop of gravy on the edge of his plate. Reaching across the table, he selected two more biscuits and broke them in half. "If Clint and Tony don't hurry up, there won't be anything left."

"Die. Pain," Clint threatened laconically as he shuffled into the kitchen. He stared at the gravy on the stove for a moment, turning and eyeing the biscuits before bringing the skillet of gravy to the table. Taking a biscuit in hand, he ground it between his palms, repeating the process with an additional two as the others looked on with fascination. Satisfied, he covered the crumbs in gravy and reached for Natasha's coffee. She slapped his hand away, frowning.

"I think I can ignore your earlier warning," Bruce murmured as he slid his cup over with a smile. "Now that you've had one helping, of course."

Clint grunted an assent, tipping the coffee in Bruce's direction. Natasha watched him wolf his breakfast down and sighed. "Well, that is the least attractive thing I've ever seen," she muttered, finishing her drink.

"Igor Strahovsky," he mumbled. "Kiev."

"Fair enough," she acquiesced after a moment's thought. Standing, she turned in time to see Tony tumble up the stairs, his eyes bloodshot and hair akimbo. "And that's my cue."

Steve quietly rose and poured a cup of coffee, immediately placing it in Tony's reaching palms as Natasha left the room. "Thanks, Spangles," the billionaire murmured, dropping into his chair opposite Bruce. "Food?"

"Here," Steve said softly, setting a full plate in front of him. Bruce watched with a curious eye, grinning at Steve's small smile. Tony inhaled his breakfast and battled Clint for seconds.

"Is there more?"

Steve frowned, glancing at the refrigerator. "I ran out of milk and eggs. And we're low on flour."
Clint stared at him suddenly. "We're going to starve?"

"Be realistic," Steve scolded. "I'll go to the store. Does anyone want to come with me?"

"I'm not a people person," Bruce said, holding his palms up. "I think I'll stay home this time."

"Lab," Tony announced succinctly.

Steve raised his brow at Clint. "Can I assume that you're going to stay home too?"

"I don't do errands," he answered with a smile.

"That's what I thought," Steve murmured as he rose. "Well, then I will see you all for dinner."

Clint glared at him. "So we are going to starve," he accused.

Steve hesitated, halfway out of his chair, and blinked at Clint for a moment. "You're a grown man, Barton. You can order yourself a pizza."

Clint grumbled to himself, to Bruce's amusement, as Steve headed towards the stairs. Pausing at the bar, he turned back. "Can I borrow someone's cell phone? Mine is still broken."

"You can take mine if you buy me pickles. I like the classic dills, the really big jars," Clint bartered. Steve pocketed both the Nokia and the keys to the Acura with a nod and stepped downstairs to Clint's call of, "Hey, pickles. Pickles. Pickles!"

His shopping expedition had taken longer than he'd planned, the sheer amount of groceries that they'd need almost overwhelming. Steve ended up with two carts filled to bursting with foodstuffs, which raised a few eyebrows at the checkout. When the teller gave him the final tally, Steve bit back a whistle and reached for his debit card, to no avail.

The soldier stared at his empty hand with something akin to shocked despair. When he glanced back up, the cashier was gazing sympathetically at him. "Forget your wallet?"

"I don't know how this happened," Steve burst out, turning red with embarrassment. "I am so sorry, sir."

The cashier gave a dismissive wave of his hand. "It happens to everyone at one point or another. Do you live alone?"

Steve blinked blankly at him, his shame making it difficult to concentrate on what the teller was asking him. "What?"

"Is there someone at your place that you can call?" the man asked kindly. "Maybe they can grab your wallet for you and bring it up here."

Steve nodded suddenly as a young mother pulled her cart into the lane. The cashier set out a 'closed' sign.

"I'll take you over here, ma'am," he told her, indicating another empty register. Steve was desperately trying to recall what had happened when the cashier rapped his knuckles on the scanner. "Call your friend and have them bring your wallet. I'll come back and finish the transaction when they get here."

"Thank you," Steve whispered, mortified. The cashier moved to the other lane and Steve fumbled in his pocket for Clint's phone. There were no saved phone numbers, which did not surprise him when
he stopped to think about it. Taking a second to remember the number for the house's land line, he hesitantly punched in the correct digits. It seemed to take an eternity for someone at the mansion to answer, but the call finally went through.

"Yeah?"

Steve breathed a slight sigh of relief at the sound of the billionaire on the other end of the line. "Tony? It's Steve."

There was a clanging sound, followed by a muffled curse. "Drop that again, Butterfingers, and I'm selling you for scrap." Steve huffed a laugh despite himself. "Why are you calling the house anyway, Spangles?"

Steve rubbed the bridge of his nose, hesitant. "I'm at the grocery store and I seem to have misplaced my wallet. The cashier was kind enough to keep everything here, so I just need someone to come up here and bring my card."

Tony grunted and Steve could hear him moving around the lab. "I'm not searching all over the house for your wallet, Betsy Ross. I'll bring mine. See you in a bit."

He hung up before Steve could thank him. Fidgeting idly, Steve settled in to wait. It took nearly forty-five minutes for Tony to burst through the automatic doors and Steve looked visibly relieved to see him.

"I really appreciate this," the soldier began, but Tony held his hand up, stopping him mid-sentence.

"What did you buy?"

Steve paused, staring at the billionaire with mild confusion. "Excuse me?"

Tony snorted, crossing his arms. "We are not leaving this place until I've made sure that you purchased something decent to eat."

"No one else complains about my cooking," Steve muttered beneath his breath, as Tony stepped purposefully towards the cart.

"It's not about your cooking, Spangles," Tony informed him, rifling through the bags. "It's about snack food, of which there appears to be none."

"Tony," Steve warned, but he was far too late. The billionaire had already snagged an abandoned cart and was starting towards the entrance.

"Come on, Stars and Stripes," he called over his shoulder. "It's time I teach you how to shop."

Steve followed him, still protesting. "I know how to shop, Tony. It's not, what, rocket science."

"Not possible," the billionaire said in response. "I've seen our pantry. There's no good drunk food there, so you don't know how to shop. It's like you've never gotten drunk before and needed to eat something. Did they even have stores in the forties? Or was everything still all empty from the Depression?"

Head reeling, Steve trailed him blindly as Tony started down Aisle One. The billionaire glanced over his shoulder at Steve. "Going to answer my question?"

"Well," Steve began, lengthening his strides to keep up. "There was some food on the shelves, but it
was so expensive that no one could really afford it. What are you doing?"

"The first rule of drunk food is that it's not allowed to have any nutritional value whatsoever," Tony lectured as he turned down a main aisle and skirted the soup section. He placed one shoe on the crossbar and pushed, riding the cart for a few feet. "The more fat and cholesterol, the better."

Steve rolled his eyes, following along indulgently. "I'm not so sure that Pepper would agree with that assessment."

Tony snorted. "Pepper would absolutely agree with me. She was in college once, which it seems you were not."

"Depression," Steve muttered succinctly, willing himself not to take offense to Tony's simple observation. "And I've never been drunk."

Steve suddenly halted, his arms flailing to keep his balance as Tony dropped both feet to the floor and whirled, staring at Steve in amazement. "Bullshit."

"It's true," Steve insisted innocently, fidgeting. "Never. And I tried."

Tony's eyes lit up. "Detail your experiment, please."

"I'd rather not talk about it," Steve finally said after some hesitation. He dropped his gaze to the floor. "Even if you said 'please'."

Tony was about to press, but paused at Steve's beseeching expression. "Eventually, I want to know how you figured that out. And then I'm going to prove you wrong."

"You'll waste a lot of money trying that," Steve told him as Tony continued on his way. Eyeing the boxes of macaroni and cheese, he reached one hand back and toppled the row into the cart. "Do we really need that many?"

"Absolutely," Tony assured, turning down another aisle. "You can never have enough drunk food."

Steve sighed, glancing to his right. "What exactly are Pop Tarts, anyway?"

"A supersaturated sugar solution wrapped in crumbly pastry topped with a corresponding icing," Tony replied, detouring his path for the cereal aisle. "We should get some."

Steve watched him drop a few boxes into the cart. Stepping up behind him, Steve put out his arm and swept a couple of rows down. Tony raised an eyebrow in his direction, silently questioning the move. Steve shrugged, fidgeting.

"We don't know when Thor will be back and Agent Coulson told me Pop Tarts were his favorite."

Tony blinked at him and nodded, remarkably solemn. "Alright then. Now chips."

Tony breezed through the aisles, dropping bags of potato and tortilla chips into the basket, following with jars of dip, boxes of popcorn, cartons of ice cream, and nearly everything in the remaining aisles. Turning the corner, they passed by the alcohol section.

"And beer for Clint," Tony muttered to himself, placing a six pack in the cart. Cocking his head, he contemplated the lone six pack and glanced at Steve. Simultaneously, they reached for more.

Grinning, Steve turned to Tony. "Do we need anything else, or are we good now?"
"I think we'll survive the month," Tony agreed, eyeing the overflowing cart. "Let's ring this up."

"A thousand channels and nothing on," Clint muttered, flipping lackadaisically through the television stations. "How is this possible?"

"Well, if it's not in my pocket, then I don't know where it is." Steve's fretful voice drifted up the stairs. Clint turned from the television as Steve and Tony stepped into the lounge. Rising, he grabbed a few of grocery bags from Tony to lighten the burden.

"What did you lose, Captain Organized?" Clint raised his brows at the number of bags in Steve's hand and the Styrofoam cooler on his shoulder. "Did you buy out the whole fucking store?"

"Almost," Steve retorted, and then frowned in consternation. He placed both handfuls of groceries onto the table and rested his palms on the top. "My wallet, of all things."

Clint dropped his bags and stared at him for a moment, then started chuckling. Steve blinked at him, his confusion rapidly degenerating into annoyance. Tony glanced from archer to soldier, his curiosity almost tangible. When Clint continued to laugh, Steve's eyes narrowed and he stepped forward.

"Clint."

The archer looked up at what had been dubbed Steve's Captain Voice and finally calmed himself. "Nat."

Steve glanced at Tony, who held his palms out. "Why would Natasha want my wallet?"

"It was kind of a contest," Clint hedged after a brief hesitation and Steve threw his hands in the air.

"I heard about that damned prank war, and if you let me go out to the store without my wallet for a contest that was clearly destined to end in a draw, I swear I'll let you starve."

Clint looked affronted. "It would never end in a draw. I would win."

"In what universe?" Steve drawled and Tony burst into laughter. Clint speared him with a black glare as Natasha stepped softly down the stairs. Steve's attention zeroed in on her. "Where is my wallet?"

"Traitor," she hissed at Clint. "You don't get to win by default, you know."

"No, I win by winning," he shot back. "I still haven't been found out."

She made a strangled noise in the back of her throat and his eyes gleamed triumphantly. Steve physically interjected himself between them and glared at Natasha. "Wallet."

The redhead sighed and leaned around him, dipping her hand into a surprised Clint's back pocket and emerging with Steve's wallet. "I still say I should win with that," she muttered beneath her breath as Steve plucked it from her grasp.

"Clint wins, but he can't gloat until the item in question is returned," Steve declared, already accustomed to being the peacemaker between the assassins. He glared at Clint's eye roll, tucking the wallet in his back pocket. Steve suddenly eyed him, wary. "It's not important, is it?"

"Nah," Clint assured. "I don't think it'll be missed for a while."

Steve eyed him for a moment, finally acquiescing. "Fine." Pointing a finger at the pair of them, he
said sternly, "No more."

"Don't want me rescuing you every time you have to buy groceries?" Tony grinned, leaning against the counter. "I'm wounded."

Steve rolled his eyes at the billionaire. "Don't you have ice cream that you have to put away?"

"Shit!"

Tony hurried to pull the melting desserts from the ice-filled Styrofoam cooler and shove them in the freezer. Natasha watched him blithely, and then her brows suddenly drew together in thought. "You were at the store?"

Steve nodded. "Without my wallet," he emphasized, satisfied when Natasha looked suitably chastened.

"I'm sorry," she offered sincerely. "I'd thought that you would notice before now. You're not Bruce, after all."

Tony turned from the refrigerator. "What have you taken of Bruce's? That's dangerous, you know."

"She steals his sweaters on occasion," Steve replied, raising a brow at Clint's soft crow of victory. "And he doesn't mind."

Natasha stared at him. "But he doesn't even notice that I've taken them! He never says anything."

"Bruce notices," Steve corrected wryly. "He just doesn't care."

"Bruce doesn't care about what?" The scientist blinked bemusedly at them from the second floor stairs.

Steve waved a greeting at him, smiling. "Nat stealing your sweaters."

"Oh." Bruce nodded, joining them in the kitchen and sliding into a seat. "Yeah, I'm not that worried about it. If I get cold, I can just ask for one back."

Clint snorted a laugh as Natasha raised her eyebrow at him. "You cold now?" she asked, dropping her fingers to the hem of the sweater she was wearing. "I can always return this."

"I'm good," Bruce assured her, holding up a hand. Steve smiled warmly at their banter and made shooing motions with his hands.

"Alright, unless you're going to help put things away, then get out of the kitchen." Spying Clint reaching for a can of Pringles, he pointed a finger at the archer. "Consuming the food does not count as helping to put it away."

"Semantics," Clint informed him haughtily, taking the can with him to the couch. Natasha stole a few from him, to his audible dismay, and Bruce shook his head at the pair as he headed to the labs.

Steve glanced up to find Tony still standing in the kitchen, staring blankly at the wall. Steve reached into one of the bags and pulled out a sack of apples. Hesitating, he moved into Tony's line of vision and caught the shorter man's attention.

"Thank you," he blurted out softly. "For coming to help today."

Tony shrugged, oddly quiet, and Steve felt a compulsion to apologize.
"Tony," Steve began, frowning when Tony held up a hand to stop him. "I -,

"We're not talking about it." Tony interrupted him quickly. "Ever."

Steve sighed, leaning back against the counter. "Look."

"Nope," Tony said, shaking his head vehemently. "Seriously, Spangles, we're good. We're fine, we're friends, whatever. But if you make me get all touchy-feely, Doctor Phil, hug-out-your-feelings because you don't believe me, I will hate you for eternity."

Steve hesitated, looking at Tony through his eyelashes. "You're sure?"

"Positive."

Steve looked relieved, relaxing against the counter. "Good."

"Tony locked me out of the lab."

Clint glanced over at Natasha, one hand poised to throw the dart between his fingers. "Okay."

She rolled her eyes, huffing a lock of hair from her eyes. "He broke my phone and I need a new one."

"Why?" Clint let the dart fly, sinking the tip into the center of the board. "We don't go anywhere and I'm the only person you call."

She glared at him. "Not true. And I can't continually beat Pepper at Words With Friends if I don't have a phone to play it on."

"I can't fucking believe you like that shit," Clint muttered, deftly throwing another dart into the bullseye.

"Just because Russian was my first language is no reason not to be better at English than native speakers," she countered lightly. "Plus, it does take some strategy."

"So play Risk with Steve. He likes board games."

She shrugged, waiting for the last dart to hit before retrieving them and settling herself on Clint's bed. "Does Tony even have any of those?"

"How the fuck should I know?"

She tilted her head, acknowledging the aptness of his reply, and thought for a few minutes. "Most people keep things in their attics, right?"

"I guess," Clint muttered as the three darts slammed into the center ring. He paused at the ominous silence. He turned to find Natasha grinning mischievously at him. "Fuck no."

"Even if there aren't board games, rifling through his things will annoy him. It will satisfy him. Let's go."

Clint groaned, but followed her obligingly regardless, knowing that resisting was futile. Peeking down the stairwell and finding it clear, she opened the small door at the end of the hall and slipped upstairs. The narrow corridor was just wide enough for a man carrying boxes and branched into two halls. The left led to the rooftop patio, and the right opened up to storage.
Natasha blithely entered the storeroom, winding her way through the stacks and scrutinizing the labels on the boxes. Clint shuffled through the opening after her.

"Don't you feel the least bit bad?"

"Nope," she replied without reservation, flipping open her blade and slicing neatly through one of the tape seals. "Stark would do worse to us if the roles were reversed. At this point, he's lucky I'm only digging through his attic and not his mainframe."

Clint sighed. It was useless to try and stop her now. Natasha was less like a spider when she got new idea and more like a pit bull. Clint found out long ago that it was simply better if he joined in. Then she'd at least have a friend in the jail cell.

Shifting idly through the contents of the carton, she frowned. "Aren't you going to help?"

Clint shook his head, handing her a roll of packing tape. "Point me where you want me." Following the line of her finger, he settled himself in the opposite corner of the attic and began to methodically sift through containers.

They'd been at it long enough for Clint's knees begin to cramp when he cracked open a box and stopped short. "What the hell?"

Natasha abandoned her side of the room and knelt by his side. "This might explain a lot," she breathed.

Carefully, she lifted out the first edition Captain America comic. It was only slightly faded, but extremely well worn. Some of the pages stuck together and it was clear that any value it held was personal. She distantly heard Clint rummage through the rest of the memorabilia, her mind whirring.

It would make perfect sense, now that she stopped to think about it. Howard Stark not only helped create Captain America, but also befriended him. What better role model for his young son than his good friend? Of course Tony had heard stories of the good Captain growing up, and what little boy wouldn't fall in love with America's War Hero? Pausing, she wondered when that had changed.

"Tash." Flicking her eyes back at Clint, she watched in shock as he lifted a perfect miniaturized replica of the Captain's shield.

"Is that … ?"

Clint flicked a finger against the curve of the shield and it resounded loudly in their ears. "Real metal. Aluminum, I'd say, based on the weight. Not the same material, but as close to the real thing that he could get."

"Shit." He glanced up at her blank face.

Ignoring his quizzical look, she delicately set the comic down and took in the vast array of paraphernalia. There was a stack of comic books, various action figures, drawings, newspaper articles, what looked to be the edge of a tiny costume, and a full set of Captain America trading cards. Natasha blinked back sudden tears as Coulson's voice echoed in her ears. *Near mint. Slight foxing around the edges.*

"Put it back." Inclining his head in her direction, Clint repacked the box exactly as he'd found it and resealed it. He looked up to see her moving swiftly to the door.

"What are you doing?"
"What I do best." Bracing herself, she lowered her feet through the opening and tossed a lock of hair from her face as she answered him. "Manipulation.

Natasha entered her passcode to the labs and gritted her teeth through the myriad of security measures. Tony was at his workbench, pieces of the Iron Man suit strewn about the tabletop and a soldering iron in his hand. She waited for him to acknowledge her presence, but he continued to work. Rolling her eyes at his childishness, she stepped forward and spoke.

"Tony."

He looked up from his gauntlet, and she realized that he had just noticed her. "Oh God, what do you want?"

"Your reaction time is down. Sad." She gave him an appraising glance, slightly amused. "And what makes you think I want anything?"

"You called me Tony," he retorted, gesturing with the iron. "That bodes well for no one, least of all, me."

"You said, when we got here, that we had free reign of the house, right?" She leaned across the table, displaying a hefty amount of cleavage. Tony replaced the iron in its holder and met her eyes over his safety glasses.

"Yes," he hedged, clearly wary. "Your point?"

"I went into your attic."

Natasha had not expected her words to have the kind of effect they had. Tony's face shuttered and he leaned back as far as he could.

"So you found it," he said flatly, and there was no question as to what he was talking about.

Natasha sighed. "You can either talk about it with me or get your thoughts straight, or you can ignore the whole thing until I tell Steve myself and he makes you talk about it and you screw everything up."

"Blackmail, Agent Romanoff, does not sit well with me."

She shook off what was clearly a step in the wrong direction. "I'm not blackmailing you, Tony."

"Funny," he shot back, standing up and snatching a glass of liquor from the counter. "That's what it felt like."

"Tony, I know you want this to work," she started.

"Get that from my psych eval, did you?"

Natasha let him verbally flay her, knowing that she somewhat deserved it, and he'd be more receptive to her words if she let him think he was in control.

"I got it from you," she countered calmly. "You told Pepper that having us here was alright. You extended the invitation yourself. That tells me that you want us to be a team, but we can't do that if you're hiding something."

"Why do you care?" Natasha was suddenly at a loss for words and Tony honed in on it like a shark
scenting blood in the waters. "What? Does the Russian spy have a heart after all? You want to settle
down and have a happy, picket fence, family life?"

In a split second, she realized that Tony was never going to give first. If she wanted results, if she
wanted the team to become a family, she would have to change her behavior. Silently cursing Clint
and his American indoctrination program, which he liked to call "Teach Tasha How to Be Human,"
she spoke. She could lie with the best of them, and Tony would never know whether or not her
words were the truth.

But she would, and that was enough.

"Yes, I do." Tony quavered, caught off guard, and she pressed on. "I've never been able to rely on
anyone. Then I relied on Clint. Then Coulson. And Coulson's gone."

Tony seemed to accept this, looking a little relieved and far more at ease with himself, some of his
cocksure attitude emerging. "We're next," he guessed, fiddling with a set of wrenches, his eyes
narrowed in thought. "So you're using us?"

Natasha thought it was easier to let him think that way. Spinning on her heel, she walked to the door.

"Don't forget about talking to Steve, Stark. Or I will."

She crowed as she heard the muffled curse behind her.

Bruce made another humming noise as he flipped through one of Howard Stark's notebooks and
Steve finally set his novel down.

"What is so interesting?"

Bruce looked up at him with wide eyes. "What?"

Steve dropped his feet to the ground and faced Bruce more fully. "You keep making noises when
you read. And looking at me."

The scientist had the grace to blush. "Well, it's just, I'm getting to the part where they're finally ready
for the first test."

"Oh." Steve nodded, understanding. "Is my picture still in there?"

"Yeah," Bruce said emphatically. "Given the transformation, this serum was amazing."

"It really was," Steve agreed, somewhat amused by Bruce's vehemence.

Bruce contemplated the notes for another few minutes while Steve reopened his book. "There's a lot
about you in here, you know," he offered tentatively.

"I should imagine so," Steve murmured inattentively.

"A lot," the scientist emphasized. "As in, much more than would normally be in the detailing of an
experiment. It seems you made quite an impression."

Steve chuckled softly, closing his book again. "It wasn't that difficult. Doctor Erskine and Mister
Stark did most of the work. I just laid there."

"That's not what Howard says," Bruce countered, waving the notebook for emphasis. He regarded it
for a moment. "It's odd that Howard Stark was so close to you, and never said anything to his son."

"I'm just a kid from Brooklyn," Steve said, his lips quirking in a nostalgic grin. "And I was gone for a long time before Tony was born. Tony said that his dad mentioned me, but I got the impression that it wasn't much."

"That's the thing," Bruce announced suddenly, leaning forward. He dropped the notebook on the table with a soft slap, arresting Steve's attention. "On the helicarrier, Tony told me that his dad never shut up about you."

Steve blinked at him. "Okay."

"Doesn't it bother you that you don't know what happened?" Bruce sounded mildly exasperated.

Steve smiled, shaking his head. "I'm not a scientist like you are, Bruce. I don't investigate things. I just make plans, and carry out strategies. So, no. It doesn't really bother me."

"What doesn't bother you?"

Bruce whirled around at Tony's unexpected entrance and stammered, "That we don't really know we whole lot about each other."

The billionaire raised one eyebrow sardonically. "Did you join the Girl Scouts when I wasn't looking? Are there going to be sleepovers and hair braiding now?"

Bruce glared at his friend, his lips pursed. "I'm just saying that it might be nice to get to know everyone a little better."

"It couldn't hurt," Steve agreed, raising his hands peaceably when Tony shot him a look of betrayal. "We haven't spent much time all in the same room."

"Dinner," Tony argued, crossing his arms.

"When you remember," Steve countered lightly. "It's not like we have a set time for anything."

Tony sighed, rolling his eyes. "Well, that's just too damned bad. Maybe you should make a schedule. You organize things."

"I'm a soldier," Steve emphasized. "Boot camp trained me to be neat."

"Hey Pepper, it's Bruce." Tony halted mid inhale and turned to stare incredulously at the scientist, who smirked unapologetically back as he spoke into the phone's handset. "I was thinking that we should all sit down together and get to know each other better. What do you think?"

"I think it's a great idea," Pepper chimed in over speakerphone. "It's past time that you guys do something like this."

"Traitor," Tony muttered beneath his breath.

"Anthony Stark, don't start with me," she replied sharply through the small speaker, and Steve smothered a smile. "I think Steve should make some snacks and you should all sit out on the patio and just talk. Let the conversation flow."

"I'm great at flow," Tony quipped, his brows still drawn low in irritation. "Flow is a lot like style and I'm all about style. Just ask Steve."

"Hey," the soldier objected with a frown.

"Go," Pepper commanded. "The three of you. Get Natasha and Clint and get going. I have work to do."

"You've had an awful lot of work to do lately," Steve commented. "We hardly see you at the mansion anymore."

Pepper sighed softly. "That's the way of the world, Steve. Don't worry about me. Go find something to feed everyone with."

"Yes ma'am," Steve said, and Bruce ended the call.

"I, for one, do not want to have to tell her that we didn't do what she wanted," he announced, rising to his feet. "Let's go."

"You cheated," Tony complained. "You cheated and that's wrong. I'm not okay with that."

Bruce raised an eyebrow at the billionaire, pausing in his movement towards the door. "Do you want to tell her that you wouldn't come?"

Tony glared. "No."

"Then let's go."

A thorough investigation of the pantry while Steve collected the assassins yielded marshmallows, chocolate bars, and graham crackers, which was enough to soothe Tony's ire. Bruce purloined four gauge nickel wire for skewers from the lab, and Clint built a roaring fire in the backyard stone fire pit with firewood that Steve collected. Natasha brought out coats and lap blankets for everyone and they were soon roasting marshmallows to their satisfaction while conversation continued.

"What are these called again?" Clint snapped his gaze to Natasha, a look of disbelief in his eyes. She shrugged, turning her skewer to roast the other side of her mallow. "I have no idea what we're doing."

"How have I not taught you this yet?" he muttered to himself, pulling a flaming marshmallow from the fire and blowing it out. "Un-fucking-believable."

She rolled her eyes at him, pulling her skewer from the fire and delicately nibbling at the sugar cylinder.

"No! You put it on the chocolate and you put the chocolate between the grahams, damn it." He gestured to Steve. "Even the old man knows what these are."

"One of these days I'm actually going to be offended by that," Steve murmured, ignoring Tony's laugh. Raising his voice, he agreed, "I may have grown up a city kid, but yes. I knew what s'mores were, and I even had a couple."

"Back in your day?" Tony asked, lightly mocking.

Steve narrowed his eyes at the billionaire, tucking his blanket more securely around his legs. "Yeah, back in my day."

"These are messy," Natasha commented, her lips turned downwards.
Tony licked a line of melted marshmallow from his hand, to her obvious disgust. "That's the best part."

"You're revolting," she muttered, carefully holding her s'more as she tried to find the least untidy method of consuming it.

Bruce chuckled softly as he watched her hesitant movements. "There's no good way to eat it," he offered. "It'll be easier if you just take a bite."

She wrinkled her nose at him, but complied. "Well," she mumbled after a moment. "They do taste good."

"Of course they fucking do," Clint replied around a mouthful of sugar and graham. "What's not to like about them?"

"There's no nutritional value?" she quipped.

Clint arched a brow at her. "Chocolate comes from the cacao bean, which is picked from a tree, which is a plant. So, chocolate is, technically, a salad."

Natasha simply stared at him, incredulous, as he returned to his s'more amid snorts of laughter from the rest of the team. Finally deciding to ignore him, she turned to Steve. "Not that Clint doesn't appreciate your idea of fire and disgusting food, but why are we out here? Really?"

"Bruce and I were thinking that we didn't really know much about each other, and Pepper thought it would be a good idea to just sit down and talk," he answered honestly.

Clint swallowed his bite slowly. "About what?"

Steve gestured loosely at Bruce. "For example?"

Bruce looked blankly at him for a moment. "Well," he hedged, drawing out the vowel. "I wanted to be a firefighter when I grew up."

Tony's brow furrowed. "Really? Why?"

"Well, largely, I think it had to do with the fact that most fire houses had the pole to slide down and a Dalmatian," Bruce admitted to genial laughter. "I was desperate for a dog as a kid, but my mom was allergic to them."

Turning to Steve, he asked, "So, what did you want to be when you grew up?"

"Honestly?" Steve turned his skewer between his palms, smiling humorlessly. "I hadn't really expected to live as long as I did."

Natasha cocked her head at him and Clint rose, ducking into the house. "For those of us who haven't read your file?"

"I was so sickly as a kid that I was sure I'd never live to see fifteen, let alone twenty-five. So I'd never really thought about it," Steve murmured, blinking at the beer bottle that suddenly appeared in his line of vision. Nodding his thanks at Clint, he accepted the beer and used his thumb to flick the top off. "I was very much living one day at a time. Kind of like now."

Clint silently passed out the rest of the six pack, holding out a glass and a bottle of scotch when Tony declined the beer. Taking his seat, his leg jumping uncharacteristically, Clint downed half of his
"I wanted to be a pilot. Not Quinjets or passenger planes. The little ones, the kind that are so small that you don't even realize you're flying a plane. It wasn't about being in control of a plane. It was about being that close to the sky."

"I wanted to be a dancer," Natasha murmured in response. Rolling her bottle between her palms, she let her thigh rest against Clint's. "I used to love watching the ballet, and at night, when I couldn't sleep, I'd crawl out of bed to dance."

"Do you still?" Bruce leaned slightly forward, offering his beer to Steve for opening. The soldier obliged and Bruce handed the open bottle to Natasha, reaching for her unopened one in return. She made the switch and shrugged. "Sometimes."

"I'd like to see that one day," Steve commented hesitantly, and Natasha smirked, feeling rather playful.

"You'd have to be in my bedroom for that to happen," she replied, her tone somewhat suggestive, laughing at the sight of the small blush on his cheeks. She raised a brow at Tony. "Your turn, Stark."

Tony was shaking his head before she'd finished, and she narrowed her eyes in irritation. "Look, we've all done it. This is a team-building exercise, so just say it. It can't be that bad."

Tony glared blackly at her and, after a few moments of mutual glowering, he reached for the scotch that Clint had brought out. Pouring himself a hefty dose, he promptly downed it and refilled the tumbler.

"I wanted to be Captain America."

The circle went silent.

Without making eye contact with anyone, Tony stood and stalked into the house. Clint let out a low whistle. "That explains the shit in his attic."

"What's in his attic?" Clint froze, staring at Steve. The soldier leaned forward, forcing Clint to meet his gaze. "What is in his attic?"

"Oh." Bruce leaned back, rubbing his palm across his mouth. "Oh, I see."

Steve shook his head, taking another sip of beer. "I still don't."

"Take a look at the situation," Natasha murmured, shifting to face Steve. "You and Howard were friends, and you influenced him. You go missing, and he spends years and years and piles of money to find you."

"Yeah, but he stopped at some point," Steve pointed out. "They told me that a Russian oil team found the plane."

"He never stopped," Steve glanced at Bruce, one brow raised. "When Howard died and the company was turned over to Tony, there was a stipulation in the will that he could only inherit if the team Howard had in place in the Arctic was kept running. The Russians just beat them to it."

Steve blinked at him. "Team?"

"The recovery team," Clint explained, allowing Steve to draw the obvious conclusion.
"I never thought," he stammered, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"Of course not," Natasha replied kindly. "You're you."

"But that doesn't change the fact that you were a very large part of Howard's, and therefore, Tony's life," Bruce continued. "Howard told him stories about you, and you became Tony's childhood hero."

"There's comic books and old movies and even a replica shield up there," Clint offered, draining his beer. "Tony was your number one fan."

Steve's brow furrowed. "So what happened?"

"You'll have to ask him," Bruce said gently. "I'm not sure that anyone knows besides Pepper."

"And you should do it soon," Natasha put in. "The longer you wait, the worse it's going to be."

Nodding silently, Steve drained his beer and stepped inside, leaving the others to their s'mores and the fire. "JARVIS, could you tell me if Tony is in his lab?"

"Of course, Captain Rogers. Your intuitions are correct."

"Thank you."

Steve turned down the stairs, hesitating at the threshold before he keyed in his entry code. Tony was sitting on the couch, a new bottle of scotch in his hand.

"I'm not talking about it."

"Of course not," Steve agreed. "It's a little chilly outside, so I thought I'd come inside to warm up."

"And you thought my lab was the perfect place for that," Tony muttered, taking another drink. Steve watched his movements, raising a brow in question at his choice of drink. "I want to get drunk. I'm not wasting my good scotch on that."

Steve murmured an acknowledgement and fell silent. Tony continued to work his way through the bottle as the minutes passed, growing steadily drunk. Steve sat quietly, patient.

"He spent years looking for you," Tony blurted out suddenly. "He just wanted to find the body. Just needed that closure. So while he was out looking for closure, I was growing up. Building circuit boards and robots and solving math equations that had stumped mathematicians for years. And what did I get? That's nice, Tony. I'm busy, Tony. Daddy's on the phone with the Cap Team, Tony, he can't see what you built."

"I'd like to tell you that was wrong of him," Steve murmured. "But I think you'll get mad."

Tony laughed hollowly. "We're way past mad, Spangles. But you telling me he was wrong forty years ago doesn't really cut it."

"It doesn't make him any less wrong though, either," Steve pointed out.

"He and my mom used to fight about it," Tony continued, his words slurring. "She'd tell him he was missing my life and he'd yell back that I wouldn't have a life if not for you. He never doubted that he'd find you. She'd say that there was no way you'd survived, especially not intact, and Dad." Tony snorted a laugh, pouring another glass with shaky hands. "Dad said that you were StarkTech, and StarkTech was made to last."
"When did it happen?" Steve asked when Tony was nearly finished with the tumbler full of scotch.

The billionaire sighed, immediately knowing what Steve was asking. "I think I was eight or so. About to be shipped off to boarding school, and instead of taking me there and moving me in, he was flying off to the Arctic. So I told him that it wasn't something that you would do. That you would be taking care of your kid.

"He almost slapped me then." Tony glanced over at Steve, taking in the set of his jaw. "First time he ever raised a hand to me. Didn't follow through, of course, but I flinched anyway. And then he told me that I knew nothing about you. That's when you stopped being my hero. Because that would hurt him."

"I never wanted to be a hero," Steve muttered. "That's not what it was about."

"That's why you were one. Still are, if we're going to be honest."

Steve shifted, running a hand through his hair. "If it makes you feel any better, you were right. With what you told your dad."

"I know," Tony replied, finishing off his glass. "So that's my big secret. The skeleton in the attic, so to speak."

Steve shrugged. "As secrets go, it's not that big."

Tony glanced askance at him, one brow raised sardonically. "And you're the master of secrets. You can't even lie to save your own ass."

Steve laughed. "Sometimes it's not about telling a lie, Tony. Sometimes, it's about not saying anything at all."

To be continued in Chapter Five.
"You must remember, family is often born of blood, but it doesn't depend on blood. Nor is it exclusive of friendship. Family members can be your best friends, you know. And best friends, whether or not they are related to you, can be your family."

— Trenton Lee Stewart, *The Mysterious Benedict Society*

"The most important thing in life is your family. There are days you love them, and others you don't, but in the end they're the people you always come home to. Sometimes it's the family you're born into, and sometimes it's the one you make for yourself."

— Candice Bergen, *Sex and the City*

Chapter Five

"Tony, I can't take this." Steve's pleading voice echoed lightly through the thin metal of the ventilation system. Natasha slid down to her belly and inched closer to the grating above Tony's desk. Peeking through the opening, she watched the billionaire wave a hand dismissively.

"Sure you can. I'm not going to use it, so you have to." Steve wavered, glancing down at the sleek touchscreen in his hand. Tony eyed him, his lips twitching with fond amusement, to Natasha's surprise. He adopted a casual mien and leaned forward, folding his hands together. "Besides, I broke yours the other day and I feel bad."

Steve's gaze shot to Tony's and, though she couldn't see the soldier's face, she could hear the slight disbelief in his tone. "No, you don't."

"You're right, I don't really," Tony replied quickly, leaning back. "But Pepper will yell at me."

"Well, we can't have that, can we?" Steve asked rhetorically, his smile bleeding into his voice.

"Oh, we can," Tony assured him, tipping further back and resting his heels on his desk. "And we do. I just prefer her yelling about things that are more legitimate than you not having a cell phone that you really don't need."

Steve cocked his head curiously. "Like what?"

"Like not telling her he was dying of palladium poisoning," Natasha called down through the vent. Steve's eyes focused on the vent grating and he reflexively caught it when she punched through. Flipping nimbly down, she and Steve both missed Tony's hand slam over his chest and his subsequent wince.

By the time she turned her attention to the billionaire, the expression of pain was replaced by a dark glare. "Door?"

She snorted at him, crossing her arms. "Your security system is ridiculous. I'm not dealing with that again. Ergo, vents."

"And that ends today," Tony muttered beneath his breath. "Did you need something, or are you
lurking for fun?"

"It's partially fun," she teased, grinning at his glower.

Steve shifted next to her. "Nat."

She sighed. "You broke my phone too," she reminded Tony. "Fix it."

He looked like he wanted to say no, but Steve gave a slight shake of his head and Tony sighed. Pushing away from the desk, he rolled back towards a set of short filing cabinets that propped up another work table. He yanked one of the drawers open and Natasha could see that it was filled nearly to the brim with StarkPhone prototypes. He fished around in the pile for a minute, picking up phones for inspection and then discarding them. He finally chose one and handed it to her.

"To your liking?"

It was, of course, the latest model and identical to Steve's. She pretended to examine it for a moment as Steve shook his head at her, twirling his own phone in his palms, before she slipped it into her back pocket. "It's acceptable. See you at dinner."

Turning on her heel, she exited the lab and made her way upstairs. When she reached the second floor, she paused in the hallway, peering at Clint's open door. It was something he'd made a point not to do. Pepper had helpfully informed them that Tony viewed an open door as an invitation, Bruce nodding along in agreement. Clint had persistently made sure to keep his closed, which was why Natasha was so intrigued.

Creeping closer, she peeked inside. The room was empty, clean of the small personal items that she and the others had begun to accumulate, but the sight that truly distressed her was in the far corner of the room.

The most appropriate term for the mess was a nest, something that Clint only did in times of great distress. Phil had told her about it once, when she had first started working with Clint, in an effort to help them form a partnership. It was something that he only did when he was extremely stressed, and she'd never seen it firsthand. Until now.

His bed was stripped, the comforter piled haphazardly in the corner. He'd purloined another few blankets from the linen closet, layering them into a mattress and surrounding them with pillows. The rumpled state of the covers told her that he'd been sleeping there.

"Is there a problem?"

Clint's voice was carefully even, and Natasha knew that spelled trouble. She slowly turned and tried not to wince at the blank look in his eyes. Adopting a casual mien, she shrugged.

"Depends."

Clint's eyes narrowed. "On?"

"You," she replied succinctly. She nodded at the nest in the corner. "Sleeping well?"

"Just fine." He pushed past her into the room and settled himself on the blankets. "You?"

"I'm not going to talk about my sleeping habits," she said, spearing him with a look.

He sighed theatrically, lacing his fingers together and placing them behind his head. "That's a pity. I
usually enjoy them."

"You haven't been lately," she shot back, trying to draw him in.

"Feeling a little tightly wound there, Babushka?" He smirked at her. "There are tools for that."

"You could always do something about it instead," she tried. "But, of course, you'd have to get out of the nest for that to happen."

"I will have you know that my nest is a very accommodating place for sex," he informed her.

"Clint."

"So there is a problem," he murmured. "Shame. It was looking to be such a good day."

"We need to talk about this," she entreated, stepping further into the room and crouching to his eye level. He groaned.

"About what, Natasha?"

She gestured to the nest. "I know what this means."

Clint's entire demeanor changed. It was subtle, something that no one else would have noticed, but she knew. He tensed the slightest bit, the exasperation on his face freezing. He blinked once, and the annoyance shifted, falling into something more inscrutable.

"Then you know that there is no point to a discussion," he retorted flatly. She opened her mouth to protest and he glared at her, his grey eyes flashing with a plea. "Tasha."

His whispered appeal tugged lightly at her and she knew the conversation was over. Sighing audibly, she rose and stalked furiously to the door. "This is not over, Clint," she warned him. "It isn't healthy, and Phil will haunt my ass if I don't try to help you."

"On my terms," he added softly, a hint of warning in his tone.

She glowered at him. "To a point."

Leaving his room, she barged into her own, the frustration overwhelming. She flung her closet doors open, suddenly feeling that a long shower was in order, and looked for her robe. It wasn't on the hanger and her gaze dropped to the overflowing laundry basket sitting innocently on the floor. The edge of the robe dangled over the edge, and she groaned. Resigned, she picked up the container and hauled it downstairs, grudgingly postponing her shower.

The laundry had originally been a guest room, they'd been told, that was converted to manage the traffic of clothing that had come through when Stark Hall was fully occupied. Despite the odd amalgam of current residents, the room was overly spacious and underused, leaving Natasha plenty of area to sort her clothes and calm her roiling mind.

Sufficiently less irritated with her partner than she'd been a quarter of an hour earlier, but still somewhat annoyed, she dropped a load of darks into the washing machine. Hesitating only for a split second, she stripped off the workout gear she was wearing and threw that in as well. Her search of the dryer yielded no clean clothes, but a row of flannel shirts hung on a rack to the right of the machines. She twitched the sleeve of one of them and, finding that it was dry, pulled it from the hanger.
She had showered and was standing at the far kitchen counter, her guns splayed out before her as she cleaned, when Steve walked in an hour later. He stopped short at the sight of her, returning her small wave with timidity before stepping forward and beginning lunch preparations, obviously trying to ignore her.

He succeeded for the most part, glancing away from the vegetable he was slicing when Clint walked into the kitchen and began rooting through the refrigerator. Natasha stopped and stared at the archer's appearance, her brows drawn angrily over her eyes. Clint paid no attention to her, instead pulling a bottle of beer from the back of the fridge and opening it, hopping up onto the counter opposite her.

Steve walked casually to the refrigerator and opened the freezer, ostensibly to search for something. Turning slightly towards Clint with the freezer door blocking a listening Natasha from view, he asked in a low voice, "Why is Natasha wearing my shirt?"

Clint continued watching the muted television, sipping at his beer. "Hers were probably all dirty," he whispered back after a moment.

Steve frowned lightly at the freezer, finally accepting Clint's explanation as something that was innately Natasha, and closed to the door with a shiver. Turning, he was suddenly face to face with an irate redhead, who was holding his shirt out to him and quite clearly wearing nothing but a faded blue bra and cream panties.

Steve's face flamed instantaneously to a brilliant red. Clint burst into laughter, setting his bottle on the counter with a loud clink. Natasha advanced a step, shaking the garment for emphasis, which sent Steve reeling back four in response, until he hit the edge of the counter Clint was sitting on.

Bruce and Tony chose that moment to emerge from the labs, and the pair halted at the sight in the kitchen. Clint was still chuckling helplessly as Bruce shook the surprise from himself and stepped forward.

The scientist carefully squeezed between Steve and Natasha's outstretched arm, dipping into the fridge for a bottle of water. He slipped between them again, the motionless pair never breaking eye contact, and took a seat on the couch. Tony finally moved in response to Bruce's safe passage through the confrontation, rubbing a tired hand across his brow and flailing his other in a shooing motion.

"Back the stalemate away from the food source," he advised, stepping into the kitchen and pausing to the side of the standoff.

Natasha's eyes narrowed slightly and she flicked her wrist, tossing the shirt at Steve. He caught it reflexively, staring at the back of her head as she returned to her weapons. Tony began rummaging through the refrigerator for leftovers appropriate enough to combine into a sandwich and Clint finally settled himself enough to hop down from the counter and join Bruce in the lounge.

After a long moment, Steve relaxed slightly, his face still blazingly crimson. Taking the shirt into his hands, he walked around the counter and behind Natasha. She stilled, tensely waiting for him to move. Gingerly, he draped the flannel over her shoulders, covering her as best he could.

She waited until he had stepped away and taken a seat on the couch before she slipped her arms through the sleeves, glaring lightly at his back for the duration.

Clint glanced over after a few minutes, noting that she'd redone the buttons, and leaned over to whisper in Steve's still red ear. "Thanks."
"For what?" the soldier asked, his eyes wide.

Clint grinned. "Making her pissed at you instead of me."

Steve cocked his head. "What was she pissed at you for?"

"That is no longer important," Clint replied with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

Steve seemed to recognize that Clint was lying and that pushing the subject would likely result in physical violence, and so he let the matter drop.

Steve knocked hesitantly on Natasha's door, secretly hoping that she wasn't there. When she called softly, "Come in," he tried not to wince.

Pushing the door open, he lingered just outside her room. She glanced up from her book at his entrance and speared him with a narrowed gaze. Gesturing to her t-shirt and sweatpants, she said sarcastically, "Fully dressed now, Rogers. Better?"

Steve huffed and rolled his eyes, recognizing that she was teasing him in her own way. "Not to sound like a prude, but I'm not used to seeing that much skin on a dame yet."

"Or a dame in your clothes," she retorted with a half smile.

Steve smoothly glossed over her observation. "I meant what I said the other day, you know."

"You generally mean what you say, Steve," she murmured with a fond grin, placing a bookmark in her book and setting it to the side. "What are you thinking of this time?"

"We never finished our conversation about you and Hulk." She froze, almost imperceptibly, and he sighed. "It's going to have to happen eventually. You may as well tell me now."

She gazed at him from beneath her lashes for a few long moments, ultimately scooting towards the head of the bed and patting the vacant space. He wavered for a second and joined her on the mattress. She leaned back into the mass of pillows and picked at a hangnail.

"I was scared," she finally admitted, studiously staring at her fidgeting fingers. Taking his cue from her, Steve eased himself further onto the bed and leaned against the wall. "I've always been afraid of him, ever since the first footage from the Culver Incident was shown. I mean, I'm small, for a woman, and something that huge could crush me before I could even scream. All of my training, all of my experience, means nothing in a fight against something like that."

Steve continued to study the photograph of London on the wall and wait for her to finish her thoughts. "Did Bruce tell you that I took an armed guard to find him in Calcutta? As if that would have done me any good. I still would have been dead. I saw that on the helicarrier, when he chased me."

She paused, turning to face him for the first time in minutes. "In all my years as an assassin and an agent, that was the closest I've been to death."

"It does have a way of putting things in perspective," Steve murmured, daring a glance in her direction. "But you can't let it get in the way of your life, with or without the Avengers."

She let out her breath in a whoosh, drawing her knees up and wrapping her arms around them. "That's why I've been hanging out in the vents."
"Nat," Steve began cautiously, shifting to meet her eyes. "Hovering over Bruce is not going to help you when Hulk comes out again. How did you manage in Midtown?"

"I ignored him," she muttered sheepishly. "It was easier when you and Thor were flanking me."

"I'll take that as a compliment," he said seriously. "But you didn't really address my concern."

"I thought." She tucked an errant curl behind her ear in an uncommon gesture of nervousness. "I thought that if I spent more time around Bruce that the Hulk would recognize me later."

"Again, hovering over Bruce in the vents, when he doesn't know that you're there, is not going to help you," he reiterated with a softly pointed look at her. "I'm not going to tell you what to do, because I want you to do this in a way that's comfortable for you, but I want you to take a little while to think about whether or not your plan is actually valid."

Offering her a small smile, he scooted off of the bed and left, aware that she stared at the door long after he eased it shut.

Clint wiped the remaining traces of his nap from his face as he walked into the kitchen. Pulling the fridge open, he frowned at the selection.

"I just put a six pack in the freezer," Steve informed him, making Clint tense reflexively before relaxing. Opening the appropriate door, Clint pulled out the beer and placed it in the fridge, snagging one for himself. He popped the cap on the counter and could feel Steve's resultant frown. "Tony hates it when you do that."

"All the more reason to," Clint replied with a smile, hopping over the couch and landing lightly opposite Steve. The soldier flicked him a glance.

"Pepper hates it too." Clint frowned.

"That's low." Steve shrugged, amused, and turned back to the phone in his hand. Clint sipped at his beer for a few minutes, watching Steve struggle with the technology. Taking pity, he scooted closer. "Whatcha got there?"

"Tony." Steve replied in a tight voice. "In his infinite wisdom, decided to give me the latest cell phone that Stark Industries has."

Clint raised a brow, feeling just the slightest bit jealous.

"It's so new, it doesn't even have a manual," Steve finished, glancing wryly at Clint, who bit back a smile. "Tony's busy with Bruce down in the lab and I really don't want to ask him how to work this thing."

Clint finally laughed at the petulant glare Steve was giving the thin piece of glass and metal in his hand. Settling his chuckles, he glanced at Steve. "Need some help?"

"I'd appreciate it," Steve smiled, handing the phone to Clint. Taking a second to inspect the cell, Clint showed Steve how to unlock it. The soldier frowned at him. "What's the point of that again?"

"It's so you don't accidentally ass-dial someone," Clint replied.

Steve's brows shot into his hairline. "Ass-dial?"

Clint chuckled at the look on Steve's face. "Yeah, you probably wouldn't understand the accidental
"dial," he murmured with amusement. Holding the phone out, Clint poked at the black screen. "See, when it's locked, you can't hit any buttons that might speed dial someone."

Showing Steve what he meant, Clint depressed the power button to light the screen and hit one of the buttons at random. The screen suddenly shifted and both men sat back as JARVIS's cultured voice emanated from the tiny speaker.

"Steve mode activated. To whom would you like to place a call?"

"What the fuck?" Clint muttered.

"Voiceprint not recognized. To whom would you like to place a call?"

Clint and Steve exchanged dubious glances. Clint elbowed Steve to prompt an answer, and the soldier leaned slightly forward. "Natasha."

"Of course, sir. Calling Natasha Romanoff."

Clint pressed the 'end call' button, shaking his head. "Only Tony," he murmured, handing the phone back to Steve. "I get the feeling that you can just ask JARVIS if you have any questions."

"Yeah, I think you're right," Steve laughed, putting the phone back into his pocket as Pepper walked up the stairs from the garage. "Hey there, stranger."

She smiled tiredly at him. "Hello Steve, Clint. How are you guys?"

"Better than you look to be," Clint muttered. She glared lightly at him and he held out his beer. "Care for a drink?"

"Absolutely," she murmured, dropping her bags to the floor and accepting his bottle. She took a draught long enough to make both men raise their brows in mild surprise and finally handed Clint his drink back with significantly less beer. "Thank you."

Steve coughed softly, gesturing to the luggage she'd brought. "Staying a while this time?"

She nodded. "My secretary at the Tower is a sweet older lady, and she forced a week's worth of vacation on me. She's been there forever, so I trust to her to handle the day to day decisions. Anything that's important, she'll bring to me."

"But other than that, you're here," Steve concluded.

Pepper smiled brightly. "Yes. I'm here."

"Clint, do you like puzzles?"

The archer shook his head, refocusing his gaze from where he'd been staring blankly at the television. Craning his neck over the back of the sofa, he blinked at Pepper. She stood in the doorway to the bedrooms, a stack of old puzzles in her arms. Her question finally registering with his brain, Clint rose suddenly and nodded.

"Yes."

She giggled softly, moving towards the kitchen. "I had hoped so. You've been looking at little bored lately."
"This is the most downtime I've had since before I joined SHIELD," he muttered, looking over the selection she'd brought as Natasha walked in from the patio. "I'm going out of my fucking mind."

"It's going to snow soon," the shorter redhead announced, shaking the chill from her limbs and stripping her outerwear off. "I can tell."

"How?" Pepper asked curiously.

"It's a Russian thing," Clint muttered. Pulling out a box from the bottom of the stack, he stared at the image of Neuschwanstein Castle with a grin. "Two thousand pieces. Perfect."

Pepper smiled at him, reaching into the refrigerator for a drink. "Will it keep you busy for a while?"

"A day or two, maybe," Clint replied, placing the rest of the puzzles in the unused breakfast nook and ignoring Pepper's blank look.

She glanced at Natasha, who nodded a confirmation, and then simply shook her head. "Can I get you two something to drink?"

"I'm fine, but thank you," Natasha said, stuffing her gloves into her coat pockets and throwing the garment on the coat rack by the door. Sliding over to the kitchen table where Clint was shaking out puzzle pieces, she reached out for a corner piece.

Clint slapped her hand away and Pepper watched with amusement as they glared a conversation to each other. Clint finally huffed and rolled his eyes, scooting a pile of pieces in her direction and setting the box top in plain sight.

Sipping at her water, Pepper meandered towards a spot by the door. They simply stood in quiet companionship for a few minutes, until Pepper cocked her head in curiosity.

"Hm," she frowned. Natasha and Clint looked up from the puzzle they were jointly assembling with startling speed.

"What is it?" Glancing over at the hands inching towards their concealed weapons, she brushed off Clint's concern.

"It's nothing," she assured, turning back to the window. "You said that it would snow soon, Nat. I just didn't think it would get bad so quickly."

The assassins relaxed immediately, Natasha more than Clint. Pepper raised a brow in question and Natasha smirked lightly at her. "Thor," they replied simultaneously.

"Oh."

Lightning struck, thunder rattled the windows, and there was a demi-god in the backyard.

There was a deafening clatter as Tony and Bruce bolted upstairs from the labs, looking wildly around for the commotion. Tony slid to a stop in front of Pepper and sighed at the sight of Thor striding towards the patio door. Bruce wiped a hand across his brow, leaning against the doorjamb as Steve descended the second floor stairs at a more sedate pace.

He crossed the room as Thor reached the door. Pepper skirted around Tony, placing a reassuring hand on his arm, and eased the door open. "Come on in," she entreated, curling her shoulders against the blast of icy air.
Thor ducked through the doorway, looking about hesitantly with his lips turned up. The others shifted backwards to accommodate his entrance and Steve stepped forward, offering a greeting.

"We weren't expecting you yet," Steve commented with a smile as they clasped hands. Thor grinned in return.

"I found I could not stay away," he replied, but there were shadows in his eyes that Steve recognized.

Assuming they had to do with Loki and the situation on Asgard, he gave Thor's hand a squeeze. "Well, we're glad to have you back."

"I am glad to be back," he assured the soldier, glancing around at the others. Bruce was still set apart from the others, trying to recompose himself, and Tony shifted in the scientist's direction. Clint and Natasha were motionless in the kitchen. Pepper joined Steve at his side and smiled brightly at Thor, trying to diffuse the tension in the room.

"We have a room set up for you already. Would you like me to take you?"

Thor nodded, the motion somewhat eager. "I would be most appreciative, my lady."

"It's Pepper," she told him, reaching for his proffered arm and leading him to the bedrooms. "My name is Pepper."

They disappeared up the stairwell and Tony let out his breath in a whoosh. "Was not expecting that. You okay, Banner?"

Natasha whirled towards the lab stairs, her eyes wild, and Bruce nodded. "I'm fine now, Tony. Just a little caught off guard." He smiled wearily at the concerned stares in his direction. "I think I've gotten a bit comfortable here.

"Nothing wrong with that," Steve said firmly. "And everything is fine now."

They stood silently for a few moments, regaining their bearings, and turned towards the sound of Pepper reentering the room. She flashed them a reassuring grin, her sharp eyes taking in Bruce's tiredness and Natasha's pale face. "He's going to settle in as much as he can, but he doesn't have any clothes. I was going to run into town real quick and pick up a few things. Nat, would you care to join me?"

"I'm driving," the assassin muttered, swiping a set of keys from the bar and darting past Bruce. Pepper followed after her with an expression of grim resignation. "God help me."

"You not going, Robin Hood?"

Clint glanced over at Tony's question and shook his head. "I'd rather gouge my own eyes out than spend the next seven hours watching Pepper buy clothes."

"I completely agree." Tony barked a laugh and eyed Bruce. "Come on, Banner. We've still got to work on that comm system."

He led the scientist back downstairs, leaving Clint and Steve alone in the lounge. After a moment, Clint spoke softly. "You should go up there and talk to him."

Steve slowly raised an eyebrow at Clint, who stared back impassively. "That's rather generous of
you, considering."

Clint shrugged. "I may hate his brother, but I saw what you saw when he walked in here. And if you want to make a team of it, then you should go talk to him."

"Last I heard, you weren't that enthusiastic about this plan," Steve retorted carefully, well aware that he was treading on very dangerous ground.

"It's important to you," Clint rejoined succinctly, crossing his arms. "Besides. Dude has demons."

"Don't we all," Steve murmured. Stopping at the fridge, he pulled out a bottle of beer and tossed it at Clint. The archer caught it reflexively with a smile and tipped Steve a casual salute. The soldier retrieved another two bottles and made his way to Thor's room. He knocked softly on the door with one bottle and stepped inside at Thor's soft admittance.

"Hello, my friend," Thor greeted, looking especially glad to see Steve. "I was about to rejoin you downstairs."

"Well, Pepper has gone with Natasha to get you some clothes," Steve began, pulling an armchair around and settling himself. He handed Thor a beer and popped the cap off of his own.

Thor let the bottle dangle in his grasp and frowned slightly, staring down at himself. "Is my armor not sufficient?"

"No, no, it's fine," Steve hastily assured him. "But we thought you'd be more comfortable in Earth clothes. Plus, they'll attract less attention if you're in town."

"This is correct, my friend," Thor finally admitted after a few moments. "You are very wise."

Steve chuckled lightly and sipped at his beer. "I'm not that wise, Thor. But thanks for thinking so."

Seeing that Thor had still not opened his bottle, Steve stretched out a hand for it. Thor gave it back sheepishly. "I am not sure how to unlatch the top without breaking the glass."

"It takes some time to know your own strength," Steve agreed, fitting one thumbnail beneath the top's ridges and pushing upwards. The cap popped off, flipping through the air and landing on the floor. Steve handed the beer back to Thor, who raised it in a silent toast. "There are plenty of bottles for you to try it on downstairs. And we bought you some Pop Tarts at the store."

Thor looked shocked. "You expected my return?"

"You're part of our team, Thor, no matter why we became one in the first place," Steve said kindly. "Of course we thought you'd come back."

"You seem to have come into your role as commander," Thor commented with a quiet smile. "I am glad for it."

Steve sighed, leaning back. "I'm getting there, that's for sure. It's like herding cats sometimes, though."

"I am unfamiliar with this term."

"It means that they're all over the place," Steve answered. "You try and keep everything in one spot, but then you turn your back, and they're scattered."

"I believe I understand now. And I would have to agree." Thor nodded, taking a drink. "The
Steve blinked at him for a moment. "Oh. Well, Bruce was a little shaken, so Tony took him to the
labs to calm down, and I have no idea where Clint went."

"I am sorry to have upset Banner," Thor murmured disconcertedly. "I did not mean to cause
disquiet."

Steve frowned. "Don't let it bother you. It's just been so calm here that I think we're all forgetting
there's a world out there."

"I understand your meaning, my friend," Thor said, dropping his gaze. "There are times when you
become so accustomed to the way that things are, that you do not see the changes in your world until
it is too late."

It was clear that Thor's thoughts had shifted from the reactions of his teammates to the events that had
led to his brother's fall from grace. Steve watched as the demi-god's eyes grew distant and he seemed
to look without seeing. The soldier was about to say something, anything, when Thor shook the
reverie from himself and smiled hollowly at Steve.

"I find myself in need of some solace after my journey. I am sorry for that."

"Oh, that's fine," Steve assured him, waving one hand dismissively. "When you're rested, feel free to
find us. This is your home too, Thor."

Thor's eyes warmed slightly as he nodded to Steve. "Thank you, my friend."

It took Pepper half a day with Thor and several Errol Flynn comparisons to declare a weekly movie
night. While she finished up additional shopping, she texted Bruce and asked him to start compiling a
list of acceptable classics with which to introduce Steve and Thor into the world of pop culture.

She briefly considering texting Tony as well, but Natasha quietly advised her to leave him out of the
plan. After all, Bruce would have a better idea of what was a classic and what was actually
appropriate for them to watch. Steve and Thor were two of the most decent men Pepper had ever
met, and having Tony introduce them to porn was something she wanted to avoid at all costs.

Arriving back at the mansion, Steve met the women at the car. At his wordless insistence, Pepper let
him be the gentleman and take the bags upstairs.

"Tony and Clint are arguing up there, and it's getting pretty heated," he warned her as Natasha
slipped up the stairs before them. Pepper squared her shoulders and marched to the lounge, ready to
clear dissension in the ranks. Apparently, Bruce had been watching idly long enough and was
playing the devil's advocate.

"Well, what constitutes a classic?" The scientist closed his notebook, finally fully integrated into the
conversation. "Are we talking about something that has stood the test of time, or something with a
massive cult following? Films lauded by the masses or by the Screen Actors Guild?"

Thor had visibly perked up at the word "guild," but his face fell as Clint muttered, "Not that kind of
guild, pal."

"Bruce, stop being difficult and disagreeing with my movie choice," Tony complained, his voice
pitched near to a whine.

Bruce chuckled. "I'm not disagreeing with anyone." He held out his arms in a gesture of peace. "I
just think you need a better method of selection.

"Well, what about our favorites?" Steve stepped forward, setting the bags down at the entrance to the kitchen. Tony turned to Clint and continued tossing out movie choices. "We all make a list of our top ten movies, and put them in a hat. We draw one out each week, and that's what we watch."

"It will definitely be less messy than this," Pepper frowned. "I think Tony and Clint are close to blows."

The two men were, in fact, suddenly well into each other's personal space, glaring profusely.

"Take it back," Tony growled.

Clint smirked coldly. "No."

"Top Gun is a cinematic marvel," Tony began to pontificate, but was swiftly interrupted by Natasha, who had been hovering nearby.

"We're not watching that."

Clint shot her an indecipherable look. Tony folded his arms. "Fine. The Hurt Locker? That won Best Picture a few years ago."

"No."

Tony frowned. "Saving Private Ryan?"

Pepper turned to him, horrified. "Are you insane? Veterans were sobbing fifty years after the war because that movie was so realistic. You are not making Steve watch it less than a year out!"

"Okay, jeez," Tony huffed as Steve looked blankly at Pepper. "Black Hawk Down?"

Clint, to the surprise of everyone in the room, simply left. Natasha scowled witheringly at Tony.

"Abso-fucking-lutely not."

Tony recovered quickly. "Why not?"

She froze, staring at him.

"What? Is this something I should know?" Peering intently at her as her mind raced, he let out a low whistle. "No. I shouldn't know this because you don't even know this. Son of a bitch."

"Tony," Bruce murmured, and the billionaire stifled himself. Natasha gritted her teeth and shot a glare at the door Clint had disappeared through, then spun on her heel and hurried up the stairs.

Thor looked helplessly at them as Pepper sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. She frowned at Steve. "Which one do you want?"

"Soldier," Steve replied succinctly. "You'll be better with Natasha, anyway. She's too nice to hit you."

Pepper laughed slightly, shaking her head as the group dispersed uneasily. She saw Tony lead Thor into the entertainment room after Bruce veered towards his lab. Climbing the stairs, she breathed deeply, and knocked gently on Natasha's door, slightly hesitant. "Natasha, can I come in?"
She received no answer, but Natasha didn't shoot at her when she eased the door open, so Pepper took it as an affirmation. The assassin was perched lightly on her bed, her back to the corner and her arms wrapped loosely around her drawn up knees. Pepper pulled out the desk chair and waited patiently for her to relax.

"I don't know why," Natasha finally whispered. "He hates all movies that have the military in them. Fuck, he won't even watch Transformers." She sniffled, swiping a sleeve across her eyes that Pepper pretended not to see. "He's been my partner for ten years. I can read his emotions like he's an open book, and it's like I don't actually know anything about him."

There was nothing for Pepper to say, nothing she could say to alleviate Natasha's distress, so she simply leaned forward and caught one of the redhead's hands, offering what support she could. The wan smile on Natasha's face told her she'd done the right thing.

Downstairs, Steve stepped cautiously onto the back patio, wearing a heavy coat and carrying another. Clint stared rigidly into the woods, his body vibrating with tension as he perched on the low edging wall. Joining him, Steve stood quietly beside his friend and silently offered the jacket. Clint took it without looking and Steve directed his attention to the forest as well.

"You okay?"

Clint snorted derisively, bundling himself in the warm wool. "Do I fucking look okay, Captain?"

Steve conceded the point with a tilt of his head. The sun began to set, brushing the tops of the trees. Their breath hung frostily in the cold air, and still they were silent. When the sun dropped below the mountain peaks, Steve murmured, "When I'm really angry, I need to hit something."

Clint nodded an acknowledgement, his body still as tight as his bowstring.

"I got used to being a punching bag, when I was a kid." Looking up at Steve, Clint saw the soldier half smile, his eyes kind.

Clint licked his dry lips as he hopped down from the ledge, his voice hoarse. "Ready?"

Nodding an affirmation, Steve instinctively blocked Clint's right hook. He twisted back and caught sight of the anguish on Clint's face. Understanding, he let the next hit land solidly on his torso.

Steve let Clint take out the frustration and hurt on his body, blocking some shots and absorbing most. When the archer finally collapsed on all fours, the moon was rising over the top of the mansion and they both dripped with sweat beneath their coats.

Heaving with exertion, Clint pushed back to his feet and caught sight of a particularly spectacular bruise on Steve's jaw line. "Fuck, I'm sorry."

"It'll heal by morning." Steve waved away his apology. "And I understand," he added lightly.

Clint laughed, a brittle sound in the air. "I'm not so sure that you do, Captain."

Steve watched Clint rake a hand through his short hair and turn away. Sorer than he cared to admit out loud, he eased himself down and leaned back against the wall, silently watching Clint pace back and forth for a few minutes.

"So, you don't like war movies?" he offered into the wordless quiet.
"I don't like military movies," Clint snapped. Steve processed the information.

"Because of your time in the military?"

Clint growled, growing angrier by the second. Steve had the fleeting thought that, if he were talking to Bruce, he’d likely be dead by now.

"Because," Clint's reply was stilted and low. "The best friend always dies. And that's reality for me. Phil was my best friend. I am responsible for his death. You have no idea what that's like."

"Yes I do." Clint turned slowly at the low murmur. Steve sat, leaning against the edging wall with one arm resting on his bent knee, and Clint finally saw the same torment in the younger man's eyes that he saw every day in the mirror.

Clint deflated a little and settled heavily next to his captain. After giving the younger man a few moments to collect himself, he nudged Steve with his shoulder. "Care to share?"

Steve remained silent for a few minutes more. When he finally spoke, his voice was just a little shaky.

"Just over eight months ago, I lost the man I called my brother. His name was Bucky, and he was my closest and oldest friend. He defended me before the serum, and he followed me, without hesitation, after it." Steve paused, his throat closing with the raw memories, and took a few moments in an attempt to compose himself. "We were trying to capture Schmidt's right hand man on a train, and we got into a firefight. I lost my shield, and Bucky picked it up to defend himself, but the force of the enemy blast blew a hole in the side of the train car and him through the hole. I went for him."

Steve swallowed thickly, his eyes bright, and turned to face Clint. "And I let him slip through my fingers and fall to his death."

Clint said nothing after Steve's revelation, fully aware that he was offering an olive branch. Steve suddenly stood and walked back into the house as the moon peaked overhead, and Clint felt oddly bereft for a moment. The captain returned quickly, a six pack of cold beers in hand. Clint accepted the proffered drink gladly, if only to have something to do with his hands in the stillness.

Picking steadily at the label, the archer spoke. "Phil wasn't just my handler; he was my friend. He was climbing the ladder when Fury told him to get a sniper, and he picked me. Came to my hometown and conned me back to headquarters. I was just some punk ass kid with everything to prove, but he set me straight real quick."

Clint chuckled at the memory, before sobering. "The other agents called me the broken soldier behind my back, and he was. He was. I still am, I guess, but Phil. He never gave up on me. He found out about my crappy schooling as a kid and taught me the basics, helped me get my GED. He lobbied for new arrows, and vacation time, and tech toys to make my job easier. He was the only one that backed me, without hesitation, when I brought Nat in instead of killing her."

"He was my big brother, the one that I should have had and didn't, the constant voice on the other end of my comm, and he's gone, and it's my fault. I attacked the helicarrier. I distracted Fury. And I did nothing while Phil took an experimental weapon after a demi-god and died."

Steve sipped at his beer, grimacing at the taste. "He was a good agent."

"The best," Clint corrected, downing half of his bottle.

"So are you," Steve countered. "Would you have really done something differently, in his place?"
"Of course," Clint scoffed quickly. Steve raised a brow.

"Really? Because that's not what Fury told us." Clint shifted and Steve knew he'd hit the mark. "Loki arrived through the portal, killed all of the support guard, and you still went after him. That's why he picked you."

"Lucky me," Clint muttered. Steve frowned.

"You are not responsible for Agent Coulson's actions on the helicarrier. Just like he wasn't responsible for yours at headquarters. Even if Loki had killed you instead, someone else would have mounted the attack on the helicarrier, and Agent Coulson would still have gone after Loki alone, because that's who he was."

Clint drained his beer and stole Steve's. "Stark was right," he complained. "You really are annoyingly perfect."

Steve chuckled. "I'm hardly perfect. But, as a soldier, I recognized Coulson for what he was." Steve seemed to disappear to another time, his eyes distant. "A good man."

Clint could only nod in response, the super soldier and the broken soldier sharing the patio in silence. When the moon finally began its descent, Steve collected the empty bottles and replaced them in the cardboard carrier.

"Come on, Clint," he murmured, pulling the shorter man to his feet. "It's time to head in."

Clint nodded absently and Steve gently nudged him towards the door. Setting the trash on the counter, he followed Clint to his door.

"Hey," he said softly, gripping Clint's sleeve lightly. "I really do understand. Any time, you -," he trailed off.

"I get it, Steve," Clint whispered, not daring to show his eyes for fear of what emotions the Captain would plainly see. "I will."

"Good night, then." Steve released his hold and stepped away, presumably leaving Clint in peace. There was no peace to be found in his room, but there was an incredibly furious ginger spy. Clint sighed, scrubbing a hand across his tired eyes.

"Can we please not do this tonight?"

"Shut the fuck up," she snarled viciously, rising from the bed, and it took all of his training not to flinch. "You stormed out of the room and I could not explain why. I have no idea why you hate military movies. Not one fucking clue. And I'm your wife," she hissed, and Clint vaguely registered that, while he was legitimately terrified for his nether regions, she was still incredibly hot. Hopefully oblivious to his internal observations, she continued. "We've been partners for ten years, married for three, and I don't know something that seems to be a fundamental part of your life. So we're doing this tonight, you cock-sucking son of a bitch."

Clint crossed his legs and collapsed on the floor, leaning back against the door frame. "You want me to start at the beginning?" he asked, without thinking.

"No, dumbass," she replied bitingly. "I'd like to be lied to some more."
Refusing to rise to the bait, Clint started to talk, his voice rough. "It's less about military movies and more about the sand. I can usually handle movies about anything up to World War II, but the sand reminds me of Iraq."

"You never went to Iraq," she stated, clearly confused as she lowered herself back onto the bed. "You were with SHIELD when Bush sent the troops over after September eleventh."


Natasha held herself very, very still, and Clint was hit with the thought of a snake, poised to strike. "You were of age to be in the Gulf War?"

He snorted nervously. "Well, yeah, Tash. How old did you think I was?"

Her eyes flinted dangerously and her voice was silky smooth. "Unlike you, I had no access to your personnel file. So I have no fucking clue how old you are."

"Forty-two," he relayed in a small voice and cringed when she shot upwards, cursing fluently in Russian. Whirling on him, she pointed a finger in his face.

"Are you joking?" she demanded, cursing another blue streak when he shook his head, this time in Hungarian.

"I married a man, and I had no idea how old he was," she muttered angrily to herself as she paced around the room. "I'm like one of those idiots from Pepper's stupid girl shows."

"I really thought you knew," he ventured hesitantly.

She glared at him. "You never told me.

"You never asked," he replied, praying he did not reignite her wrath. She was still for a moment, although this pause was more reminiscent of a statue than a serpent, for which Clint was incredibly grateful. After an eternity, the tension drained from her body and she dropped to the floor, slumping back against the bed. Dropping her head to her hands, she massaged her temples.

"I feel stupid," she confessed. "And inhuman."

Clint winced at her tone. Crawling over, he pulled her into his lap and brushed her hair from her face. "You're not inhuman. You're Tasha. And we're assassins. Age isn't really something we discuss over first date drinks."

"No," she murmured into his collarbone and he heard the smile in her voice. "As I recall, our first date was you watching me seduce my target and then missing your shot."

Clint's laughter rumbled through her. "I didn't miss, baby. I was firing a warning shot."

"You keep telling yourself that," she retorted. "I know the truth."

To be continued in Chapter Six.
"You must remember, family is often born of blood, but it doesn't depend on blood. Nor is it exclusive of friendship. Family members can be your best friends, you know. And best friends, whether or not they are related to you, can be your family."

— Trenton Lee Stewart, *The Mysterious Benedict Society*

"The most important thing in life is your family. There are days you love them, and others you don't, but in the end they're the people you always come home to. Sometimes it's the family you're born into, and sometimes it's the one you make for yourself."

— Candice Bergen, *Sex and the City*

Chapter Six

Webpage not available.

Steve sighed at the tablet and tried again.

Webpage not available.

He clicked on his email account. Fine. And the main browser page. Also fine. The New York Times site.

Webpage not available.

"JARVIS," Steve finally called in exasperation. "How do I get the newspaper delivered to my StarkTablet?"

"I'm afraid I'm not authorized to access outside media sources for your tablet, Captain Rogers."

Steve frowned at the ceiling. "What?"

"I am not authorized to access outside media- ,"

"I understand," Steve interrupted, growing more irritated by the second. "Thank you."

Setting his jaw, he walked downstairs with the tablet in hand. Tony was in the lab, as he'd expected, and Steve paused at the entrance, debating the merits of punching through the glass door or following through with all of Tony's protocols. In the end, he simply knocked on the doorframe and waited to be admitted. Tony glanced up at the sound and waved him through.

"The admittance procedures are there for a reason."

Steve breathed in deeply, trying to settle himself. "Tony."

His tone must have carried a bit of his frustration, because Tony merely raised an eyebrow and, thankfully, changed topics. "Something on your mind, Spangles?"
Steve suppressed a growl at his nickname, his ire at the technology block getting the better of him. "JARVIS has informed me that he's not allowed to access media webpages on my tablet."

Tony blinked at him with bemusement and focused his gaze on the screen in Steve's hand. He held out a palm. "Give it."

Steve handed it over without hesitation. Tony tapped at a few things, alternating between scowling at the tablet and looking curiously at it. Suddenly, he turned his attention to his worktop, opening the browser and trying to access CNN's website. He frowned when the attempt failed and finally passed the tablet back to Steve.

"Don't know. You can't log on to any news site from here, so I'm going to assume that it's something Pepper's done."

"Pepper?"

Tony glanced back up at him. "Yeah. Pep handles stuff like this, blocking some of the news sites when I get really crazy. I'd ask her."

"I see." Steve nodded slowly. "Thanks, Tony."

The soldier walked upstairs slowly, his brow furrowed in thought. Pepper was seated at the kitchen table, conversing with Natasha about her busy schedule. Plucking a glass from the cabinet, Steve carefully poured her a glass of water.

"Anything we can help with?" he asked during a slight pause. "It sounds like there's a lot of things left for you to take care of."

Pepper shook her head as she took the glass, sipping delicately at the cool liquid. "It's work-related. Just a few cleanup items." Steve nodded as Thor joined them in the kitchen.

"Does it have anything to do with why I can't get a copy of the newspaper?"

Pepper froze, almost imperceptibly, and then took another small drink. "I don't know what you're talking about, Steve."

Natasha looked curiously between the two as Steve abandoned all hope of a normal conversation and pulled out his Captain Voice. "Pepper."

She sighed at his implacable tone, setting her glass on the table with a soft clink. "Are you going to make me tell you?"

"I can't order you to tell me, if that's what you're asking," he pointed out as Tony stepped into the room, raising a brow in silent question. "But I'd appreciate knowing what is so terrible that you're trying to hide it from us."

Standing, Pepper turned towards the television. "JARVIS," she called out. "Please remove the media block from the television."

"Media block removed, Miss Potts."

"Thank you," she murmured and flipped the television on, changing the channel immediately to CNN.

"It's just not something that the military can do by itself," a man was saying. He was thin and reedy,
like a bird, with balding brown hair and an innocuous voice that didn’t match the hideous words emerging from his mouth. "And nor should they have to. America already has billions of dollars worth of debt. Are the taxpayers going to front the bill for the rebuilding efforts?"

The mediator, a smaller portly gentleman, frowned and leaned forward as scenes of the cleanup efforts danced across the screen, sorrowful looking business owners sweeping glass from their store fronts and fatigue-clad men clearing roadways of rubble and cars. "Are you suggesting that we hunt down the Avengers and ask them to open their wallets after what they did for our city? For the world?"

"To our city," the man emphasized. "All I'm saying is that Tony Stark was clearly part of the team that was in New York that day, and," he chuckled slightly, sending ripples of unease through the room. Clint and Bruce had wandered in at some point, standing off to the side, and Clint was watching the news cast with visible displeasure. "Well, I think we can all guess where I'm going with this. The truth of it is, the so-called Avengers have abandoned us. They came in and destroyed our city, and disappeared off the face of the Earth, in one case, literally. Are they too good to help us now?"

The mediator seemed to visibly calm himself. "While that's an interesting viewpoint, Senator Boynton -,

"It's the only viewpoint," a nasally voice cut in. The camera panned to another man, whose name plate indicated that he was the former Senator Stern and Steve swore he heard Tony growl. "There's no other way to put it. The Avengers left New York in its time of need and they should be held accountable for what they've done to this city."

Pepper switched the television off again, turning to Steve with a sympathetic eye. His brow furrowed with irritated confusion.

"They're angry with us?"

"They think that, because we caused some of the damage while we were trying to repel the invasion, we should be there to clean up," Bruce elaborated gently, moving to stand by the soldier. "I saw the same thing after the Abomination and I ripped up Harlem."

Steve gaped at Bruce for a moment, his face openly shocked. After a few seconds, his visage crumpled and he rubbed a hand across his brow. "I should be there," he murmured.

"No." The room's attention turned to Tony, who was still standing at the edge of the room, his arms crossed and his eyes furious. He continued, glaring at the blank screen as he spoke. "No, Steve, you have done enough for them."

"You all have," Pepper corrected, her voice soft as she looked pointedly at Tony. "There's no reason for any of you to be there."

Steve made a protesting noise in the back of his throat. "They need us," he insisted, gesturing at the screen with his hand.

"Steve," Tony stepped forward, his tone carefully calm. "Those senators are just trying to stir up trouble. Stern and I have a history, because he's an asshole, and it's not pretty, because he's really an asshole. So if you cave and go back there, you will be playing right into their trap."

He looked seriously into Steve's eyes and the soldier met his gaze with earnest. "You will have come running like a dog when they called and they are just going to treat you like shit for the rest of their
Pepper watched with bated breath as Steve wrestled with his need to help the people of his city and the information that Tony had just given him. He finally looked back up at Tony, looking achingly young, and nodded.

"You're right."

Tony smiled, not unkindly. "Of course I am." With a soft snap of his fingers, Tony caught the soldier's attention before the images of the stricken city could settle in his mind again. "Feed me? I skipped breakfast."

Steve chuckled, the noise welcomed in the tension-fraught room. "You wouldn't need feeding if you surfaced for meals like a normal person."

"If I were normal, I'd be boring," Tony commented flippantly, plopping himself into a chair at the table. "And much more poor."

Steve rolled his eyes fondly, moving towards the fridge. "What would you like?"

"Pancakes," Tony replied succinctly.

Pepper sighed softly. "Like a child."

"I prefer waffles," Natasha put in, grinning at Pepper's comment. "If you're taking orders."

"What is wrong with you?" Tony looked aghast at her pronouncement. "No, don't answer that. I don't have all day."

In a split second, the stress was buried again. Pepper knew that Tony had won the battle, but there might still be a war over the cleanup efforts. Thinking with grim resignation at the juggling she was going to have to do with the accounts in order to siphon some more money for the restoration efforts, she was caught by surprise when Steve's hand waved in her line of vision.

"What about you, Pepper?" he asked with a slight smile. "Pancakes or waffles?"

Setting her mental to-do list aside, she grinned at him, allowing him to distract her for the moment. "Pancakes," she replied ignoring Tony's cry of approval. There was a shadow in Steve's eyes, and she knew that the discussion was far from over.

Pepper was correct in her line of thinking. The impromptu meal passed quickly and the team scattered, but Steve stayed behind in the lounge. He carded one hand through his hair and sat heavily in the window seat overlooking the patio. Dropping his face into his palms, he pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes until he saw stars.

When he finally raised his head, Thor was in the room. The demi-god was gazing curiously at him. "Are you well?"

Steve exhaled noisily. "Yeah," he muttered, leaning back into the seat and offering a place to Thor. "I'm just trying to figure out people these days."

"Are they not the same as they were?"

Steve laughed hollowly as Thor eased into the place beside him. "I never thought that people could change so much in so little time, but they have. There were all kinds of revolutions while I was gone,
Thor nodded slowly. "You are still thinking about the television program we saw earlier."

"It seems that we're being punished for helping to save the world," Steve said, keeping his eyes trained on a spot across the room. "Damned if you do and damned if you don't, you know?"

Thor seemed to understand the sentiment, if not the overwhelming emotion behind it, and softly murmured an agreement. Steve picked up the remote from the side table and turned the television on.

Channel after channel was reporting the same tired images of the National Guard members and citizens of both coasts trying to put their lives back together. Both men watched as Steve flipped through the stations, listening to personal testimonies and politicians until he turned the system off again in disgust.

"I am afraid, Captain," Thor began hesitantly. "That I may never learn to understand humans."

Steve chuckled humorlessly. "That makes two of us." He wiped a hand over his face tiredly. "And call me Steve, Thor. We're not on the battlefield."

They were quiet again for a few moments, before Thor looked thoughtfully at Steve. "This is a battlefield of sorts, is it not?"

Steve looked askance at him, trying to see where Thor was going with his train of thought.

"My mother once told me, when I was much younger and unwilling to attend to my lessons, that I must view the process of learning as a battle to be won." Thor chuckled to himself. "I see now that she was simply using a mother's intuition to compel me into my education. But I feel that her words are not incorrect. Do you agree, Steve?"

Steve blinked at him, and suddenly realized that, for all of his blundering and arrogance, Thor was incredibly smart. He chewed on his bottom lip, a nervous tic he had picked up from Peggy, of all people. "I think your mother is a real clever lady, Thor."

Thor smiled gently, and let the matter drop, confident that he'd made his point. Glancing over, he nodded when Clint entered the room. He turned back to Steve as Clint pulled a bottle of water out of the fridge and stood, hovering, at the edge of the conversation.

"Why do you make the distinction between Captain Rogers and Steve Rogers?" Steve blinked at him. Thor waved his hand, gesticulating. "You are a Captain on the battlefield, but you are Steve in the mansion, correct?"

Thor's question clicked and Steve smiled, somewhat wry. "Captain America started as a senator's joke," he said flatly. "It was a stage persona that Senator Brandt dreamed up to sell war bonds and motivate the people. Then he was actually a war hero. And now he's an Avenger. When I'm wearing the suit, I am Captain America, the star spangled man with a plan."

Clint inched closer and Steve looked up at Thor. "But that's not me. When I'm not in uniform, I'm just a kid from Brooklyn who is way out of his depths in this world. Captain America can adapt to any situation. Steve Rogers can't."

"I think that you can," Thor replied, without a second's pause. Clint perched on the end of the other couch. "You are here, are you not?"

Steve gave a choked laugh. "Yes. Yes, I am."
They fell into a companionable silence for long minutes until Natasha walked in from the bedrooms and announced, "I'm doing laundry."

The three men turned to stare as she stood at the edge of the lounge with an armful of dirty clothes. Steve simply blinked at her, the tips of his ears burning a brilliant red. Thor glanced from soldier to spy curiously and Clint rolled his eyes, settling further into the couch cushions.

"Is there a point to that statement, Babushka?"

Natasha's eyes narrowed to slits. "I don't have enough for a full load, so I'm asking if any of you have a pile you'd like me to throw in. I thought I'd take a page out of Steve's book and be nice, since he has been the only person that's been doing any kind of chores around here."

"I've been doing chores," Clint muttered petulantly.

"Eating what he cooks and microwaving leftovers does not count as a chore," she reprimanded sternly. "Do you have clothes to wash?"

"Yeah," he grumbled, polishing off his water and rising to his feet. "I'll bring them down."

She arched a brow at Steve and Thor. Steve held his hands up peacefully. "I just did mine a couple of days ago. I'm set, but thank you."

"I have not soiled my clothes enough to warrant washing," Thor stammered out when she turned her piercing gaze in his direction. "And most of them are still new."

"Fine," she retorted. "But if you start smelling strangely, I will hose you down outside. There's enough of that from Tony."

"I've not noticed an odor from him," Thor said, glancing at Steve dubiously.

The soldier hid a chuckle beneath his hand as Natasha rolled her eyes. "And you've only been here a couple of days. Give it time."

Any reply Thor could have had was cut short as Clint tumbled down the stairs beneath a massive pile of laundry. Steve grinned as a couple of socks flaked off from the top of the pile.

"Need a hand with that?"

Clint's voice was muffled by the clothes. "No thanks, Cap. I got it. Lead the way, Tash."

Sighing, Natasha shifted her basket to one hand and prodded Clint forward with the other, murmuring soft warnings as they descended the stairs. He dropped his clothes in a pile in front of the washer and hitched himself onto the folding table. Natasha eyed him questioningly.

"You said that you wanted to do chores and be helpful. Have fun with that."

She froze momentarily, staring at him, and ultimately decided that pummeling him was going to be ineffective. Crouching down, she began sorting their laundry into darks and lights.

"Just in case of what?"

Natasha glanced up at him, frowning when she saw that Clint was staring off to the side. "What are you talking about?"

"That." He pointed one finger at the drying rack to her left.
The drying rack was conspicuously empty save for a single shirt that Natasha recognized as the flannel of Steve's that she'd borrowed. Pinned to the top button was a small note that read 'just in case,' written in the soldier's careful penmanship.

"In case I need it," she told him, stripping out of her blouse and pants. She tugged the plaid button-down from the hanger and slipped it over her shoulders. "This is Steve's shirt."

"Ah," Clint acknowledged. He watched her idly for a few minutes as she went about her business. Their silence was relaxed and comfortable, until Natasha turned to put a load into the washer and spoke.

"You can't punish Thor for what his brother did to you," she said matter-of-factly, ignoring his sudden stare. "It's not Thor's fault Loki went batshit."

Clint could only gape openly at her. "What?"

She closed the lid of the machine and arched an eyebrow in his direction. "I saw the way you were eyeing Thor upstairs. You don't trust him. And, since he saved my life on the helicarrier, the only reason I can think of is Loki."

"It's not that I don't trust him," Clint hedged, fidgeting with the switchblade he pulled from his pocket to occupy his hands.

She rolled her eyes sardonically at him. "It's that you don't trust him."

Clint glared at her, continuing to flick the blade open and closed. His movements grew more and more decisive, the clicking of the spring lock beginning to sound almost angry, until he flipped the blade open and hurled it into the wall.

"It's because of Thor that this all happened!"

She raised an eyebrow at him. "It wasn't his fault."

"Yes it was," he burst out. "He drove Loki to it, through neglect and bullying and oppression."

Natasha paused in the act of sorting clothes, cocking her head at him curiously. "Where did you get something like that?"

"Like what?" he snarled out.

She stepped forward, three small steps, and continued eyeing him like she'd never seen him before. "Those were not your words, were they? They're not something you would ever say. So you got them from somewhere else. Who?"

Clint slammed his jaw shut, glowering mutinously at her. She leaned back slightly, her expression growing kind.

"I understand that it's easy to blame Thor. But you've only heard one side of the story, and that's Loki's. How about you think about that for a little bit, hm?"

"Maybe he told me the truth," Clint pointed out mulishly.

"And maybe he's the Trickster for a reason," she countered lightly. "The Tesseract is gone and your thoughts are your own again. It's time you start acting like it."
Natasha, being a spy and not a sniper, was not quite as patient as Clint. She gave herself credit, however, for giving him a whole week to jar himself from his rut and mentally rejoin the team.

She woke slowly, stretching languorously and burying her head deeper into the pillow, letting her senses wake up in their own time. She felt no warning prickle on the back of her neck and raised her head to find herself alone in Clint's room again, marking the seventh day that he hadn't slept in his bed or his nest.

Sighing to herself, she shook off her disappointment and rose for the day. Steve was in the kitchen, of course, when she went downstairs after her shower.

"You look like a housewife," Natasha commented to him as she stepped into the kitchen. "Where'd you get the apron?"

"At the cooking store, with Pepper," he answered calmly, unfazed by her teasing. "I won't feed you if you're going to make fun of me."

"That would be a tragedy." She smiled at him, sliding into a seat at the table. "What's for breakfast?"

"I went traditional. Sausage and eggs today, with biscuits." He glanced at her over his shoulder, using a spatula to tip some links onto a platter. "You're up early."

"Not so much," she retorted as he poured her a cup of coffee and set it lightly in front of her. She eyed it with mistrust. "Did you make this?"

He glared at her lightly as he pulled the biscuits from the oven and dumped them into a basket. "No. Pepper did, before she left. It's safe."

"If you say so," she muttered dubiously, surreptitiously sniffing the mug when he turned his back. There was a loud clatter from the direction of the basement and Tony tripped up the stairs. Steve poured another cup and handed it to her. She raised an eyebrow at Tony's stumbling. "Good morning."

Tony grunted, blindly accepting the cup of coffee that she nudged in his direction. Bruce joined them from the patio with a quiet greeting, and after a moment, Clint snuck into the kitchen behind Thor for the third morning in a row. Natasha watched as he reached blindly for the coffeepot. The archer responded politely to Steve's questions and took the seat across from Bruce, piling his plate with biscuits.

One of the things that made Clint such a good spy was his ability to act, to blend seamlessly into a situation. He was good at fooling the people around him, because he was better at acting, better at lying, than they were.

But he wasn't a better spy than her. And he couldn't hide his bloodshot eyes.

"How'd you sleep?" Clint raised his bleary gaze at her, his sharp mind wary. She smiled guilelessly at him. "You look a little tired."

"'M fine," he mumbled, dragging the plate of sausage closer.

She watched him tear the biscuit in half with a raised eyebrow. "Are you sure?"

He gave her a small glare as the others watched curiously. "Yes."

"Good," she said crisply. "Then you'll be up for a training session later."
"Training session?" Steve looked up from his plate with interest. "Where are you going to be training?"

"I set up a few targets in a clearing last night," Natasha replied blandly, ignoring Clint's sudden stare. "Would you like to come with us?"

Steve nodded. "Yeah, actually. I think it would be a good idea."

"I would like to train with you, my friend," Thor answered with a smile. "Although I feel that I should leave Mjölnir behind this time."

"Might be helpful." The soldier grinned and then speared Tony and Bruce with a look. "Would you guys like to come too?"

They glanced over from their conversation, eyes wide. Bruce cocked his head questioningly. "Come where?"

"To train." At Bruce's blank stare, Steve wavered and amended, "Well, maybe just to watch this time."

"I've heard that before," Tony muttered, getting up to refill his coffee as Bruce began to stammer out a refusal.

Natasha leaned back in her chair, smirking lightly at Tony. "You could use the practice, now that Happy isn't giving you boxing lessons anymore."

He narrowed his eyes at her, retaking his seat. "I'm not out of practice."

"Good." Her smirk became a full-blown grin and Tony faltered. "Then you can spar with me."

Tony made a strangled noise in the back of his throat and nodded hesitantly. "Sure."

"Perfect." She pushed back from the table and stood, ignoring the uncharacteristic glare that Bruce was giving Tony. "I'll see you out there in an hour."

She walked out of the kitchen and left the billionaire staring blankly at the stairwell. "Shit."

They grudgingly traipsed out to the makeshift training grounds an hour later, Thor and Steve seeming to be the only ones enthusiastic about the planned event. The fact that Clint had brought his bow case out gave Natasha hope, until he ignored his favorite bow and pulled his Glock and a spare magazine from a separate compartment. She sighed as Tony dropped his gear to the ground and began taping his hands, pointedly ignoring Bruce hovering beside him and their quietly intense conversation.

Clint walked to the far edge of the range with his weapon and stood just behind the marked line. He raised the gun and fired off one full magazine in rapid succession, reloading in one swift movement and transferring to a second target. He pulled the trigger once and shouted "fuck" at the top of his lungs.

His sudden outburst hooked the attention of the rest of the range. As Clint furiously put his gun away and slammed the case shut, Tony wandered down to the target. Pointing to the bullet hole, he raised a brow at Clint. "How is this a 'fuck' kind of shot?"

"Shut up, Stark," Clint growled.
Tony, predictably, did not. "Look, you even hit the center ring!"

Natasha raised her brows in surprise as Clint left his case and stalked deeper into the forest. Steve joined Tony at the target, fingering the bullet hole just gracing the edge of the bullseye. He turned to Natasha, who was still staring at the path Clint had gone down.

"This is bad, right?"

She nodded, not turning to look at him. "He may as well have missed by a mile."

The training session ended quickly after Clint's departure, to Bruce's obvious relief. Natasha stormed off towards the mansion, in the exact opposite direction that Clint had gone. Steve took one last look at the way the archer had disappeared before turning and motioning for the others to head back to the mansion.

"I don't think we're going to do anyone any good if we try to continue," the soldier muttered, looking slightly poleaxed as Bruce stalked down to the lab, shooting a frown in Tony's direction. "Sorry, Thor."

"It is alright," the demi-god assured him seriously. "Barton is still healing from his wounds. There is nothing to apologize for."

Sharing a glance, Steve and Thor retreated into their rooms and Tony locked himself in his lab for the rest of the day.

The billionaire finally looked up at the sound of the garage door opening into the night air, the growl of an engine echoing down the drive. Abandoning his project for the moment, he watched with interest as Clint rode Steve's motorcycle down the drive and parked it. He caught sight of Tony and ignored the inquisitive look on the billionaire's face, moving towards the stairs with purpose.

"Steve's going to be annoyed if he finds out you're joyriding on his baby," Tony commented lightly, wiping his hands on a piece of toweling. "How'd you get it out of here, anyway? I didn't notice."


"Touché," Tony acknowledged, walking around the work table. He stood directly in Clint's way, eyeing the archer curiously. "What was that, earlier?"

Clint's face closed immediately. "Nothing."

"Come on," Tony entreated, pressing the issue. "A lousy shot is going to piss you off that badly?"

"A lousy shot could get someone killed," Clint snarled, eyes sparking with anger. Shaking his head, he pushed around Tony.

"You know," Tony called. The hint of censure in his voice gave Clint pause in his ascent up the stairs. "You're not the only one that misses him."

Clint tensed and froze, slowly turning to face Tony. The billionaire bit back a gasp of surprise at the enraged look on Clint's face. "You don't know shit about this," he seethed.

Tony glared back. "You weren't the only person who cared about him."

"You didn't know him!"
"I may not have known him in the same way that you did," Tony replied with a quiet anger. "But don't you dare belittle our friendship like that."

"Friendship?" Clint scoffed. "You were his babysitting project. You were nothing but an assignment."

"Then you were nothing but an employee to him."

Clint sneered. "Fuck you Stark."

"Fuck you back, Katniss."

Turning his back on Tony's cold smirk, Clint pounded up the stairs. Steve emerged from the laundry room, a basket of folded clothes in his hands and cocked his head at Clint.

"Everything okay?"

"Peachy," Clint growled as he moved to pass Steve. In a move faster than he expected from the soldier, Steve dropped the basket and his hand shot out to catch hold of Clint's arm.

"I'd accept that," Steve said pleasantly. "Had I not heard everything you and Tony just said." He gave Clint a half-smile and pointed a finger at his ear. "Enhanced hearing, you know."

Clint breathed deeply, in and out. "Let it go, Rogers."

"I can't do that, Clint," Steve replied honestly. "You're having trouble, and I have seen what that can do to a person. You need help."

"What I need," Clint said through clenched teeth. "Is for you to fucking let go of my arm."

Steve hesitated a moment, slowly uncurling his fingers from the archer's arm. Clint remained perfectly still. "I'm just trying to help," he murmured gently.

"Don't bother," Clint retorted. "You can't."

He continued up the second flight of stairs to the main floor, not bothering to spare Steve another glance. The lounge was blessedly empty, because Clint didn't think he could handle talking to another person. His muscles were so tense from his two encounters that his movements were stiff and jerky, completely negating any good the long ride had done.

Barging into his room, he was met with Natasha staring him down over the barrel of the gun he kept beneath his pillow. Blinking in confusion, he raked his eyes over her form. She was wearing one of his old shirts, one of the first she'd stolen from him, and had clearly been surprised out of a light sleep. In his bed.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

She rolled her eyes, uncocking the Glock and shoving it back beneath his pillow. "Well, I was sleeping."

He crossed his arms. "Why?"

"Because I was tired," she mumbled, snuggling back beneath the coverlet. Clint grew impatient.

"Why my bed?"
Rising again, she blinked at him. "Well, yours is more comfortable than mine."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Clint threw his hands in the air.

"I tried out both, and I like yours better," she reiterated. Her eyes narrowed to slits. "Of course, you'd have known this if you'd bothered to sleep in either one at any point for the last week."

"Now is not the time," he warned her, to no avail.

"I don't care that you don't want to talk about this right now, darlin'," she sniped, dusting off one of his favorite nicknames for her. "Because you need help."

"Everyone's a fucking doctor," he muttered. "Fuck this. If you won't move, I'll move you."

He stepped forward, intending to pick her up and haul her physically from the room, when she did the most unexpected thing.

She slapped him. Hard.

Clint glared at her, feeling more furious with her than he'd ever been. "No."

His response seemed to be all the encouragement she needed to being an impromptu hand–to–hand session in his bedroom.

Bruce poked his head sleepily into the hall, and woke fully as he heard a loud crash and Natasha's outcry. He had the idea to knock on the door and see if everything was alright, but another loud crash and a grunt of pain made the thought a fleeting one. He spared a glance at Thor's still closed door and decided that, if anyone could survive what was happening in Clint's room, it would be the demi-god. Hurrying down the stairs, he found Tony complaining angrily to Steve in the kitchen.

"I think they're killing each other," he announced as a thud echoed from the direction of the upstairs.

Steve and Tony exchanged glances at the noise. "We should go up there," Tony said.

Steve was shaking his head before Tony had even finished speaking. "Uh, no."

The billionaire frowned at him. "If we don't stop them, they'll either destroy my mansion or kill each other. Rebuilding will take more time and money than I care to deal with and blood is exceedingly hard to get out of carpet."

"I do not want to know how you know that," Steve murmured, sipping at a mug of cocoa. He gently nudged Tony towards the lab, motioning for Bruce to come along. "We'll find out which it is later. I, for one, am not getting in between the two of them when they're going at it like this."

Tony frowned. "Fine," he capitulated, allowing himself to be herded downstairs. "JARVIS, alert us if there are gunshots."

"Of course, sir."

Clint had taken the stance he maintained in most training sessions, allowing Natasha to attack without holding back while he imitated a general assailant, never using his full strength and rarely landing a blow. It wasn't until she began swinging wildly, one lucky shot bloodying his nose, that he decided to act.
Carefully, so as not to injure her, he began defending himself against her punches, slowly loosening her guard until he could clamp his hands around her arms and set her gently on the floor. Once he was sure that she wasn't going to continue her assault, he gingerly removed his grip and walked to the closet.

It had become second nature, for both Natasha and Clint, to have a bag packed. It was their safety net, an insurance policy, that if things got too rough, they had an out and old habits died hard. Plucking it from the back of the closet, Clint slung the bag over his shoulder and headed towards the door.

His alarm clock hit the edge with a loud crack, knocking the knob from his hand and slamming the door shut. He stopped short as it fell to pieces on the floor.

"Running away won't fix this."

He turned slowly at her soft murmur. Her hair was tangled and falling unkemptly into her face, hiding the few drying tear tracks on her cheeks.

"I'm not running away," he told her and she snorted, unimpressed.

"Spin me another story, Clint," she scoffed. "That's exactly what you're doing."

"Of course I am!" He dropped the bag to the floor, turning angrily on her. "Why shouldn't I? I killed fellow agents. I tried to kill you. I am the reason Phil is gone." His voice cracked minutely on his friend's name and he swallowed back the lump in his throat. "How can you even look at me?"

"None of this was your fault," she began gently, moving to stand in front of him.

Clint pushed her hands away, moving further into the room to escape her sympathy. "Don't say that," he murmured entreatingly. Unknowingly, he'd switched to speaking in Russian. "I could feel the Tesseract in my brain."

"Then it wasn't you," she replied, also in Russian. "It was Loki and the Tesseract."

"But I didn't stop it." He was speaking Arabic now, his tongue choosing languages without his brain's consent. "I could feel it, digging around in my memories, and sometimes I could fight it, and sometimes it overwhelmed me."

"But you tried, and that was more than most could have done."

"But it wasn't enough!" Hungarian, and agonized. "I killed Phil!"

"You didn't stab him." Her German was as harsh as her words.

"I may as well have," he whispered in broken French.

Natasha's eyes searched his angrily, frustrated at his insistence. Shoving at him, she urged him towards the bathroom.

"Clean yourself up," she commanded. "You look like shit and blood is dripping everywhere."

Clint slept fitfully in his nest that night, Natasha watching him from her perch on the bed. He finally fell into a deeper sleep around dawn, and she slipped downstairs to allow him some privacy when he awoke.
Steve had not made it to the kitchen yet, but the coffee pot was happily percolating in the corner. Pouring herself a cup, she went in search of her quarry.

Clint had told her bits and pieces of the interactions he'd had with Tony and Steve the night before. She knew that the soldier understood Clint's situation mostly, if not completely, but Tony was another entity entirely.

She found him in the lab, not actually working, for once, but just staring off into the distance with his hands clasped beneath his chin. Opening the door, she slipped inside and hitched herself onto the corner of his desk. He remained silent, ignoring her entrance.

"He didn't really mean it, you know," she offered lightly after a pause, studiously focusing her attention on the garage. "What he said about you being an assignment."

Tony turned and blinked at her bemusedly, thrown by the turn of the conversation. After a moment of him staring at her, she finally felt his gaze and turned to peek questioningly at him from behind a curtain of hair. "What?"

"Clint," she murmured. "He knows that Coulson thought the world of you."

Tony snorted and she watched pride and grief chase each other across his face. "Agent thought the world of Steve."

"Steve was his hero, yes," she admitted, shifting to face him. "But there is a reason why Fury constantly calls on you to fix things, like the helicarrier."

"Because I can," Tony emphasized and Natasha shook her head calmly, a smile playing at her lips. "Because Phil told him to," she admonished gently, taking in the stunned look on Tony's face. "Phil was there when you created the new core. He saw how you worked, saw what you could do. We all knew something of it from Afghanistan, but Phil had a habit of pressing the issue."

"He took in strays."

She raised one eyebrow at his distracted utterance. "What was that?"

"Nothing," Tony replied quickly, straining for nonchalance. "It was just a bad habit he told me about a while ago."

She grinned nostalgically, hopping off the edge of the desk. "Just remember that, the next time Clint lets his grief get the better of him."

"Remember what?" Tony called as she moved towards the door.

Natasha turned and cocked her head at him, a small smile on her lips. "You were his stray, too."

When she walked into her bedroom that night, Clint was sitting cross legged on her bed, wearing only a pair of boxers. Pointedly keeping her face neutral, she shut the door. "What are you doing here?"

Clint stared at his feet, picking at a thread on the coverlet. "It's bedtime."

She stared at him for a moment, waiting until he met her eyes. Wordlessly, she stripped herself of her clothes and slid into place next to him.
He wasn't back to normal, not by a long shot, but he was finally grieving properly. As he snuggled into her pillow and dropped off to the first night of good sleep that he'd gotten in months, Natasha let out a sigh of relief. He was going to be okay.

Clint squirmed again. "I'm thirsty," he whispered. Natasha scooted back, pressing into his side, and murmured something unintelligible. Taking that as a "then go get some damned water," Clint carefully extracted himself from the bed and stumbled to the bathroom. After fumbling around in the dark for a moment, he failed to locate the glass he'd left there that morning. Or the other day. Or, maybe, last week.

Grumbling beneath his breath, he moved towards the door. Clint quietly slipped outside, concentrating as he shut the door as silently as possible, and then looked up into the blearily amused eyes of Tony Stark.

"You're up late," the billionaire commented offhandedly, breaking the tense silence.

Clint gave him no quarter, inching towards the stairs. "So are you."

Tony's lips quirked and Clint braced himself. "So. Three years, huh?"

Clint blinked at Tony for a moment, his still-sleepy brain processing the other man's remark. "What?"

"Slow on the uptake at this time of night?" Tony hummed sympathetically. "You and Red. Married, three years."

The archer stared at him, somewhat horrified. "How the fuck did you find that out?"

"The walls are a little thinner than you'd think. And she was fairly loud," Tony offered, to Clint's rising irritation. "I came upstairs after I set Thor up with a movie and sent Pep down to help him run the entertainment system."

Brushing past him, Clint mumbled, "Shut up, Stark."

"I'm just saying, I think you make a very lethal couple," Tony insisted, trailing Clint down to the kitchen. "It's rather terrifying, really."

"What is it going to take for you to keep your mouth shut about this?"

Tony raised an eyebrow at Clint as the archer yanked the refrigerator door open and began rooting through it. "I haven't been?"

Clint nearly growled at the man, emerging with the pitcher of water. "It's not your usual trend to sit on something like this."

Tony leaned back against the counter, crossing his arms. "You know, Spangles has a tendency to rub off on people. Maybe I'm just being a nice guy."

"Bullshit." Studying the billionaire, Clint gave the older man a feral grin. "Or Tasha terrifies you."

Tony shrugged casually. "You'll never know."

Clint smirked. "I'll know."

Bruce looked up from the article he was perusing at the soft knock on the door. Steve looked terribly
out of place on the other side of the glass, wearing his standard khaki/plaid combination that Pepper's best efforts couldn't completely erase and holding a heaping tray of sandwiches. The soldier stepped inside at Bruce's gesture. "Hey, Bruce," Steve greeted him, looking vainly for a clean space to set the tray on.

Bruce smiled. "Hey Steve." He pushed some papers together, clearing a small area at the corner of his desk. Steve offered him the plate of sandwiches and Bruce realized just how hungry he was.

Selecting one, he asked wryly, "So how long have I been down here?"

"It's nearly two in the afternoon," Steve confessed, biting into his own sandwich.

Bruce groaned. "I'm turning into Tony, aren't I?"

"No," Steve said quickly, ducking his head. "You're not that sarcastic."

Bruce nearly choked on his lunch.

The soldier smiled sheepishly. "Anyway, I just wanted to bring you something to eat and to offer a suggestion."

Bruce wisely let it slide, picking out another sandwich. "What kind of suggestion?"

"I think you should train with us."

Bruce froze, arm in process of returning with his acquisition. Steve hurriedly continued.

"I just got to thinking that you've been working on control and that, you're one of the ones that no one really recognizes so you go out more than the rest of us. And if something happened while you were out, and you were trained, then you wouldn't feel threatened and maybe you wouldn't Hulk out sometimes. Plus, Natasha really was shaken and she's getting more comfortable with you, but you aren't going to be the one out there with us. Hulk is."

Steve continued to chatter, desperately trying to justify his thought process, as Bruce slowly mulled over what he was hearing. He realized that Steve had finally stuttered to a stop and was now picking at the crust of his sandwich nervously.

"Ignoring most of the interesting things you just mentioned, what happens when I hurt someone?"

Steve was quiet for long enough that Bruce assumed he had made his point.

"Well," the soldier started hesitantly. "You've been suppressing the Other Guy for a long time now. Years, right?"

"Mmmmm." Bruce trained his eyes on the floor.

"Maybe, if you let him out on purpose, he wouldn't be so angry."

Steve's childlike sincerity was somewhat exasperating. "That's all he is, Steve. There aren't really degrees to his anger."

"But he listened."

Bruce looked back up at Steve's earnest eyes. "What?"

"In New York. When you let him out and he killed that flying thing. Even afterwards, when I gave
out the orders, he listened. And he saved Tony." Steve was more and more ardent as he continued, and Bruce was starting to feel slightly frantic. Steve stopped speaking abruptly, and Bruce let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. "I'm sorry," Steve murmured. "I wasn't trying to push."

"I know," Bruce assured him. "But I'm not sure it's a good idea."

"If you don't want to, you don't have to," Steve said after a few minutes. "I just think it might be a good idea, in the long run."

Bruce dropped his gaze back to the plate of sandwiches, trying to collate the information Steve's nervous chatter had supplied him with. A sudden thought sliced through his thought process and he glanced back up at Steve. "Training?"

The soldier nodded hesitantly. "Clint and Nat have fought only each other for the last few months and are about ready to start climbing the walls and I really think that you and Tony could use some background in hand to hand. I know I could learn a thing or two from them."

"You want Tony to train."

The words were flat and unexpected, more of a bland statement than a question, and Steve cocked his head curiously at the scientist. "Well, yeah. He's part of the team."

Bruce shook his head so vehemently that his dark curls flew into his face. "I don't think it's a good idea."

"He's not always going to have that suit, you know," Steve began patiently, pausing when he took a good look at the expression on Bruce's face. The scientist squirmed under his scrutiny. "What is this really about?"

Bruce sighed, rubbing a hand across his brow. "You can't tell anyone," he warned. "I'm pretty sure Tony would be pissed if he found out I was telling you."

"If it's something that could affect the team or how we work together, then I need to know," Steve insisted, unconsciously leaning forward. "What's going on?"

"Tony had the arc reactor removed." Steve blinked at him, uncomprehendingly. "He underwent surgery to remove the shrapnel that the arc reactor was keeping from slicing through his heart, which negated the need for the reactor, period."

Steve frowned. "What does that matter? The suits have arc reactors, and the one in his chest didn't power anything."

"No, it didn't," Bruce agreed, trying to tamp down on the impatience he was feeling. "But it was *in his chest."

Steve stared at him for a moment and Bruce waited for the man's Depression Era–biology classes to kick in. It was clear the moment that Steve grasped the full weight of what Bruce was trying to tell him, his blue eyes going impossibly wide.

"You mean to tell me that there's nothing between his heart and the outside world?"

Bruce snorted, relief flooding through him as he shared the burden of Tony's secret with someone else. "He's had a bone plug inserted, but his body is rejecting it. I took blood samples the last time I re-bandaged the wound, and his white blood cell count, the cells that destroy invaders into the body, is through the roof."
"Does Pepper know?" Steve looked torn between exasperation and concern, his expression landing somewhere in the "I wish I were surprised" region of the spectrum.

"I don't think she knows that the bone plug is being rejected," Bruce told him with a nod. "Or that he has an infection. He keeps taking his meds, thinking that will help."

"And how long will that take?" Steve asked wryly, sighing when Bruce simply held up his hands helplessly. Steve paused for a moment, and then his brows slammed down in confused anger. "But he went out the other day, when Nat tricked him into going to train. He was taping his hands and everything."

"Tony is a stubborn person," Bruce reminded him, quirking his lips at Steve's snort. "He honestly thinks that he's fine, no matter what I keep trying to tell him. I'm not even sure that he realizes the extent of the damage, because he hasn't seen the labs."

"Either that, or he's very confident in his own fighting skills." The soldier ran a hand through his hair, slightly mussing the strands. "And I'm not allowed to tell anyone, or let Tony know that I know?"

"It would be preferable," Bruce admitted. "But most importantly, under no circumstances, is he allowed within a thousand yards of a physical conflict."

"Agreed," Steve concurred grimly.

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*To be continued in Chapter Seven.*
"You must remember, family is often born of blood, but it doesn't depend on blood. Nor is it exclusive of friendship. Family members can be your best friends, you know. And best friends, whether or not they are related to you, can be your family."

— Trenton Lee Stewart, *The Mysterious Benedict Society*

"The most important thing in life is your family. There are days you love them, and others you don't, but in the end they're the people you always come home to. Sometimes it's the family you're born into, and sometimes it's the one you make for yourself."

— Candice Bergen, *Sex and the City*

Chapter Seven

Contrary to Bruce's quiet belief, Steve was quite adept at lies of omission, if not at lying outright. Tony remained oblivious to the soldier's knowledge, even if Bruce noticed that Steve was particularly cautious in regards to the resident billionaire. Being so concerned with Tony finding out that he'd told Steve, however, diverted Bruce's attention from the assassins, who had clearly realized that something was different.

Clint leaned over the bar, keeping his eyes on the tableau in front of them. Tony held out a hand for the tablet he'd left in the kitchen and Steve obliged. His gaze didn't seem to rise above Tony's heart as he handed the older man the requested item.

"Do you see what I see?" Clint asked softly. Natasha nodded, dropping a couple of ice cubes into her glass of water. "What the fuck?"

"No idea," she murmured back, watching curiously. "But there's definitely something."

"Tony hasn't noticed."

Natasha snorted delicately, taking a sip and swirling the glass to distribute the cooling water. "Stark's running on less than four hours of sleep in the last two days. You could run streaking through the lounge and he probably wouldn't notice."

"Care to take a wager on that?" Clint asked teasingly, leering lightly in her direction.

She glared at him. "No. Steve would never survive, not after the laundry incident."

"I thought he was going to develop a permanent blush," he chuckled.

"Do you think that the two of you could stop flirting all over my bar and hand me a bottle?" Tony's tired voice sliced through their conversation and Clint rolled his eyes. Dropping to his haunches behind the counter, the archer opened both cabinet doors and raised his eyebrows at their emptiness.

"Uh, no. I can't. Because there isn't any."

Tony stared at him, agape. "What the fuck do you mean, 'there isn't any'?" he demanded.
"It's my house. I have more liquor stockpiled for the month than Thor has Pop Tarts."

"Well, not in here," Clint said stoutly, closing the doors and rising. Tony stood from his seat on the couch and stalked over, clearly intending to see for himself. Peering into the empty bar, his brow furrowed.

"What the hell?" Tony straightened, glancing out at the lounge. Clint saw his eyes narrow dangerously after a split second. "Spangles, what have you done with my liquor?"

Steve shrugged, his face deceptively blank. "It may have been disposed of."

"This is going to be good," Clint whispered to Natasha as Tony slowly placed his hands on the bar top.

"You are going to need an exceptionally compelling reason for dumping my good scotch down the drain."

Steve finally met his eyes, his expression unrepentant. "I think it's a good idea for you to cut down a bit."

"It is never a good idea for me to cut down on alcohol," Tony shot back, irritation rampantly evident in his tone.

"It might be, at the moment," Steve emphasized stubbornly, giving Tony a pointed look.

"What the fuck?" Clint muttered. The two men paid no attention to him, simply staring each other down with mutual expressions of annoyance until Tony cursed aloud.

"He told you, didn't he?"

Clint arched an eyebrow at Natasha, who shrugged, looking just as interested in the conversation as he was. Steve straightened, but did not back down.

"It's a damn good thing he did," Steve informed him, nonplussed when Tony slammed a hand on the counter and began to pace. "I was going to send you out for training. Real training, this time, with no reason to stop you from actually sparring with someone."

The admission gave Tony the barest hint of a pause before his customary attitude won out. "I could have handled it."

"What the fuck are you two talking about?" Clint watched as Tony clamped his mouth shut and Steve crossed his arms.

"You need to tell them," the soldier insisted. "We're a team now and they have a right to know."

"No, they fucking don't," Tony shot back as Thor stepped in from the patio and eyed the room with wary curiosity.

"Tony." Bruce had emerged from the labs at some point in the conversation and was looking at Tony with pleading eyes. "Just tell them."

The billionaire seemed to war with himself between betrayal at Bruce's request and anger at the world in general. Suddenly reaching a decision, he fumbled with the hem of his shirt and stripped it over his head in one movement. Clint eyed the large wrapping that covered his chest and blinked in surprise as Tony began to unwind the binding from around his torso.
The beige Ace bandage piled into a massive heap at his feet and, with one swift motion, Tony yanked at the remaining white gauze. Clint swore into his hand and Natasha involuntarily gasped aloud as the dressing peeled away from his skin.

The gleaming metal frame of Tony's arc reactor was gone, replaced by creamy white bone and jagged edges of wound. Pockets of pus boiled up at the periphery in stark contrast to the crimson of the inflamed skin. Visible bits of granulation tissue edged over the bone plug, angry and red. A small drainage tube emerged from the wound base and there was a fresh tear in the surrounding dermis, from the forcible removal of the bandage, that seeped blood onto his skin.

"I thought I told you to be careful with that," Bruce muttered, stepping forward. Tony narrowed his eyes at the scientist, but held his tongue as Bruce poked and prodded at the loose tube.

Natasha looked ashen as she confronted Tony, her hands planted on her hips. "What happened?"

"I had the shrapnel removed," Tony informed her with slight derision, ignoring Thor's questioning look. "No need for an electromagnet in my chest without it."

"Because a giant hole in your ribcage is infinitely better," Clint replied snidely, dropping into a chair and placing his feet on the table. "Is that infected?"

"It is," Bruce confirmed, oblivious to Tony's glare as he picked up the fallen bandage. "His body is rejecting the bone plug that the doctors put in, which means it's not actually attached to the rest of his rib cage. Not well, at least. The slightest impact could shift it, leading to bits breaking off or soft tissue getting punctured."

"God Almighty," Steve whispered, his brows slamming down in anger. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that you ask me that question a lot," Tony muttered to himself, tracking Bruce longingly as the scientist–turned–medic went to retrieve the first aid kit from beneath the sink. "I'm not a fan."

"Tony, the degree to which you are currently vulnerable is obscene," Natasha said, her words clipped and furious. "Assuming that you're actually taking your medication when Pepper isn't around to remind you, drinking your normal amount of scotch in addition to the drugs is probably destroying your organs. And training with us could have killed you."

Tony rolled his eyes, but Bruce was close enough to see the slight panic in them as he returned. "I had no idea you cared."

"Natasha is correct, my friend," Thor offered softly, looking concerned and slightly ill. "This is madness. You must heal."

"Fix it." All attention turned to Steve's low words. He was staring at Tony with a mix of disapproval and concern, arms crossed resolutely over his chest. "I don't care how you do it, but that is going to be good as new within the week."

"It'll take longer than that for new meds to kick in, which is probably what a doctor would prescribe," Tony placated. "It'll be fine."

"You can't walk around like that," Natasha insisted, Thor nodding fervently in agreement. "Take the plug out and try again later. Put the arc reactor back in for now."

Tony glowered at her, his attempt at intimidation somewhat lessened when Bruce forced his arms
above his head to get them out of his way while he taped new gauze down. "I can't."

"Well, why not?"

Tony glanced over at the soldier's exasperated query, and shifted, batting Bruce's hands away from his chest. "Because it's in Malibu."

"Fuck, I'll go get the damn thing if means Stark puts his shirt back on," Clint groused, rising. "He's not the one I want to see topless."

"You can't," Tony announced through clenched teeth as Bruce retrieved the Ace bandage from the floor.

Clint arched an eyebrow mockingly, folding his arms. "Oh yeah? Why not?"

"Because I threw it in the damned ocean!"

Even Bruce stared at him incredulously, pausing in his actions. "Why did you do that?"

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," Tony replied sullenly. Clint snorted. "How's it looking now?"

"Enough," Steve said, stemming another argument. "You made the first arc reactor in a cave in the desert. You can make another one here just fine."

Tony straightened, taking the Ace bandage from Bruce and busying himself with rewinding it around his torso. "And if I don't want to?"

"Are you stupid?"

Tony raised a brow at Natasha's furious hiss. "Nope, last I checked, still topping MENSA's list."

"Tony."

"It'll heal just fine on its own," he snapped at Steve, feeling his lack of sleep and beyond frustrated with the turn of the conversation. When he hazarded a glance at the soldier, Steve's young face was oddly wise.

"On what time frame?" Steve sighed softly at Tony's blank look. "Will you be ready to fight if we get drawn out into a battle next month? Or the month after? Or will you be just as vulnerable as you are now?"

Tony was silent and Steve simply stared, satisfied that his point had been made. "I won't give you an order, because we both know it's a complete waste of air, but that's something that I want you to think about."

"How do you know I will?" The blurted question was a cheap attempt at having the last word, and the whole room knew it, but Tony couldn't help himself. Steve turned away from the patio door, a slight smile on his face.

"Besides building, thinking is the one thing that you do best."

Smoothly turning the knob, he stepped outside and Clint let out a low whistle. "Best parting shot ever."
Steve was relaxing quietly in his room, still feeling rather proud of himself for his gentle rejoinder to Tony, when the comm system in the wall blared to life.

"Spangles, get your happy ass down to the lab."

Setting his book down, Steve involuntarily raised an eyebrow at the speaker. "Deigning to call me down yourself, instead of having JARVIS do it? I'm almost flattered."

Tony let out a disgruntled sigh. "JARVIS is programmed to be nice, and I'm still irritated with you. I haven't slept in two days."

"Do you want a medal?" Steve muttered beneath his breath. He sighed softly and then raised his voice. "I'll be right down."

"Don't dress up," Tony advised, and the comm clicked off.

His brow furrowed in confusion, Steve made his way down to the labs. Standing at Tony's door, he knocked politely. The billionaire's head popped up over a lab bench, his face contorted in a scowl. His waved his hand in an impatient gesture, pointing at the keypad.

Steve rolled his eyes, punching in his key code. He leaned down to allow the iris scanner access and then raised his arms as another scanned him from head to toe. After an interminable amount of time, the door clicked open and allowed him in.

"I see why no one ever visits you," Steve commented wryly, his lips kicked up in a half smile. "Your security system is worse than SHIELD's."

"And look how that turned out for them," Tony said glibly, raising his hands in a peaceful gesture at Steve's black glare. "My bad."

Steve sighed softly, crossing his arms. "Why did you call me down here?"

"You," Tony emphasized. "Want me to make a new arc reactor, and I can't do that without the original setup, which was taken down and destroyed. Since this is your grand plan, I figure you owe me some help."

"Did you have help last time?"

Tony glanced up at Steve's flippant tone, wrinkling his nose at the soldier's raised brow. Looking back down, he concentrated on wiping the grease from his fingers with a stained towel. "Agent was there."

Even after well more than half a year, the mere mention of Phil Coulson was enough to instantly sober any member of the team, the guilt-tinged grief still raw and chafing. Steve nodded solemnly. "What do you need me to do?"

"JARVIS." The AI responded immediately, silently pulling up a set of plans to Tony's desk. Stepping over to the worktop, he tapped once on the touchscreen and formed a three dimensional representation. Steve whistled softly, reaching out a hand.

The hologram responded to his touch, spinning slowly to the right. Now focused on the mechanics of the plans rather than their impressive presentation, Steve's brow furrowed in concentration. Keeping his gaze on the rendering, he directed his questions to Tony. "So, you need to build this tube?"
"It's technically a particle accelerator," Tony corrected. "But yes."

"A what?"

"Particle accelerator," Tony enunciated. "That which accelerates particles. An isochronous synchrotron, to be exact, but that's not the important part. This is: I need one. You're helping."

Steve glanced at him dubiously, but nodded. "Alright. It's not dangerous, is it?"

"It wasn't last time." The billionaire shrugged, turning back towards the lab. "Everything needs to be shoved against the walls. I'll get the frame going."

Shaking his head as Tony began hauling aluminum rods to a corner of the workshop, Steve unbuttoned his plaid shirt and draped it across the back of the desk chair. The two men worked in a companionable silence, Tony occasionally directing Steve. The work only stopped when the air vent above Tony's desk fell to the floor with a crash. Tony startled, his head whipping around to stare at the hole in his ceiling and one hand rising to protect his chest. Steve, however, calmly continued setting up the aluminum framework.

"Hey Clint," he called out as the archer's boots dangled from the opening. "Did you need something?"

"I locked that," Tony interjected, abandoning a few lengths of pipe and glowering at the archer, who was easing himself out of the vent. He dropped lightly to the balls of his feet in front of Tony's desk and shrugged, smirking.

"I picked it." Tony glared blackly at Clint as he turned to Steve and chided, "Answer your fucking phone, man. We've been calling you for hours."

"You mean you have been calling me for hours," Steve corrected, drilling one last piece into place and rising gracefully. "You couldn't just come down here?"

Clint scowled lightly at him. "You didn't. answer. your phone. I didn't know you were down here."

"JARVIS," Tony reminded him tersely. He pointed a finger at the air vent. "You're going to fix that, right?"

"Wrong," Clint retorted, his eyes smiling at Tony's exasperated growl. The billionaire pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Let me rephrase that. You're going to fix that, Barton."

Steve physically stepped between the two men. "I'll fix the vent later, if it's that important. What did you need, Clint?"

The archer folded his arms and met Steve's eyes meaningfully. "It's dinner time."

"What's the matter, Barton? Can't feed yourself?"

"No, he really can't," Steve answered, leaving the two men to glower at each other while he washed the dust and grease from his hands at the lab sink. "Nat has told me that his cooking rivals yours."

Tony's eyes flashed with understanding. "It must be atrocious."

"So she tells me," Clint affirmed, his lips twitching upwards. He turned to Steve. "How long will it take you?"
Steve reached out a hand and made a waffling gesture. "It depends on how long it takes you to fix Tony's vent."

Clint rolled his eyes, but picked up the grating regardless, setting it on the table. He clambered onto Tony's desk, grinning at the billionaire's cry of irritation, and hoisted himself into the ventilation system. Once settled, he reached a hand down and Steve kindly handed him the cover. Clint pulled it into place with a click.

"Just so you know," he said conversationally. "I'm starving. Best get on that."

Tony snorted, joining Steve at his desk. "Why?"

"Clint gets, well," Steve began, trying to think of the proper terminology. "I think it's 'hangry.' Where you get so hungry that you become angry."

Tony stared at Steve for a moment, mouth agape.

"That is the best description I've heard," he finally admitted. After a split second, his surprise melted into amusement. "I think we're lucky that doesn't happen to Bruce."

The days passed in a blur of activity as the plans for the external training room were finally finished to everyone's satisfaction and supplies were ordered. Thor, they found out, was rather a social creature and he and Steve had spent hours in conversation together as a result. Natasha flitted from group to group, eventually returning to the vents above Bruce's lab when the others failed to entertain her sufficiently.

Clint, in contrast, spent his hours pestering Tony from the ventilation duct above his desk. Tony had bought increasingly complicated locks for the grate that Clint picked in a matter of seconds, peppering the billionaire with barbs as he did so.

The only guarantee that they would gather together was at a meal time. Steve never called them together. He simply made the food, and they all arrived on their own, drawn by the scent of home cooked meals.

It was also the only time they were ever quiet, for the most part. Glancing up, Steve mentally took roll. Downing his last bite with a drink of water, he turned to Bruce.

"Where's Tony?"

The scientist shrugged, reaching for another spoonful of mashed potatoes. "Last I saw, he was in the lab."

"And when was that?"

Bruce froze, his brow furrowed in thought. Silence fell as the rest of the table stopped eating to watch curiously. After a minute, Bruce looked up at Steve. "Monday?"

"That was three days ago," Clint interjected, raising an eyebrow at Natasha.

She rolled her eyes. "I'm not surprised."

"When was the last time that anyone saw Tony outside of the lab?" Steve asked, placing both hands on the table.

Thor leaned forward, pulling the plate of chicken towards him. "I witnessed him entering the lab on
Saturday last, after Clint retrieved you both for the evening meal. I believe that is the final time he was out."

"He's been down there five days," Steve mused. He nodded to himself, his lips drawn in a thin line. "Then he probably hasn't eaten either."

"Usually Pepper forcibly reminds him that he has to take care of himself," Natasha put in, sipping delicately at her drink. "She's been really busy lately, though, now that she's not on vacation anymore."

"And is likely to continue to be," Thor added pointedly.

Steve sighed, rubbing a hand across his brow. "I do not want to be the one to tell her that Tony worked himself to death," he muttered. "Someone should go get him."

"Not it," Clint replied immediately.

Bruce swallowed quickly, choking slightly. "Not it, either."

"I choose no, also," Thor announced, looking marginally confused at the turn of events. Steve turned to Natasha.

She raised a brow in his direction. "Is that an order?"

"A humble request," the soldier responded immediately, looking abashed. "You know him best out of all of us."

She snorted, laying down her silverware and rising. "You're all cowards," she informed them, heading up the stairs.

"Self-preservation," Bruce whispered to Thor, who let out a surprised chuckle.

The men resumed their dinner after a few moments, finishing their plates quietly, until Natasha passed by the table with a syringe held aloft. Clint turned at the movement in his periphery and dropped his utensils in a clatter of metal on ceramic. He sprinted towards the entrance to the labs, bracing himself against the doorframe.

Shaking his head vehemently, he swallowed his bite. "No."

Natasha huffed impatiently at him. "It's just a light sedative."

"I don't fucking care," Clint retorted, ignoring the astonished commotion at the table. "I'm not going to let you down there with that."

"Then how am I supposed to go get him?"

Steve rose, wiping his mouth off on his napkin. "I'll handle it," he said, his voice somewhere between stern and resigned. "Clint, come sit down. Finish your dinner, Nat."

The two agents stared at each other for another beat before the tension in their bodies eased and they returned to the table. Steve piled food onto a clean plate, ignoring Thor's look of quiet distress at the action, and headed down to the labs.

Tony was hunched over the casing to the arc reactor, his hands delicately manipulating tweezers as he tested connections. Steve's polite knock went unanswered and he keyed in his code and withstood the scans and tests with resignation. Approaching the work table with deliberately noisy footsteps, he
placed the plate on the corner of the desk.

Tony finally looked up at the movement, raising his safety glasses to reveal bloodshot eyes and a growing beard. "What is that?"

His voice was hoarse from disuse, and scratchy. Steve repressed the urge to roll his eyes and silently wondered how a man as brilliant as Tony could do so poorly at taking care of himself. "You missed dinner."

"Whoops." Tony reached for the plate, suddenly aware of how hungry he was.

Steve placed a hand in between Tony's questing fingers and the food. "Five days in a row."

Tony paused, raising quietly surprised eyes to the soldier. "I'm sorry?"

Steve sighed, removing the barrier between Tony and his meal. The older man tucked into the plate with vigor, inhaling the simple fare. Steve watched him passively for a moment, his arms folded sternly across his chest.

"I'm instituting a five day rule."

Tony flicked his eyes up at Steve, pausing minutely. "A what?"

"A five day rule," Steve repeated. "Natasha was ready to sedate you in order to get you upstairs."

Tony's eyebrows slammed downwards, his face contorting into a frown.

"Clint wouldn't let her down here, but she had a bit of a point," Steve continued, glossing over the beginning of Tony's objections. "So, if you haven't eaten or showered or been upstairs, with people, for one hundred and twenty hours, then you will be forcibly dragged from your lab and made to act like a normal human being for at least a day."

Tony scowled, savagely chewing a bite of bread. "Define forcibly."

"You have the choice of either Thor or Natasha," Steve replied calmly. "Natasha will break into the lab as she sees fit and sedate you. Thor will break into the lab as he sees fit, which will probably involve much more damage, and throw you over his shoulder."

"Fuck," Tony said, the curse lacking any real heat. "Fine."

Steve allowed himself a small smile of triumph. "Thank you."

The incessant noise continued, no matter what Steve tried. Growing exasperated, he set the phone on the desk, where it continued to vibrate merrily to the tune of 'The Star Spangled Man.'

"JARVIS, how do I answer that?" Steve felt mildly foolish for asking Tony's AI to help him answer his phone, but he was at his wit's end. Thankfully, Tony really had programmed JARVIS to do everything.

"I have routed the call to your room's phone, Captain Rogers. You may use that handset instead."

Steve breathed a sigh of relief at the AI's calm tones. The handset in his room was a modern phone in what was now called a vintage style, which simply meant that it had an earpiece and a receiver and was something that didn't require the delicate precision his cell phone seemed to. "Hello?"
"Captain Rogers?" the voice on the other end was precise and cool and decidedly feminine. Steve grinned, taking a seat in his desk chair.

"I thought we agreed that you're supposed to call me Steve, Maria."

"That was a while ago," she hedged, her tone relaxing into something more casual. "I wasn't sure if you'd still think that way after this long of a silence."

"I don't really have enough friends to lose any," he replied wryly, and she laughed.

"Point taken."

When she didn't say anything else, Steve felt the wordless quiet growing awkward. Shifting in his chair, he raised his eyebrows. "Did you need something?"

She sighed slightly. "Yes. And I really don't want to have to do this."

"I'm sure it's fine," he said reassuringly. "What's going on?"

"I'm calling to ask you to come in."

Steve blinked. "Come in?"

"Yes. The director would like to speak with you about something in person."

Natasha knocked on his doorframe and he motioned her inside. She gave him a questioning look and he placed one hand over the receiver to mouth "Hill" at her. She nodded, filching one of his science fiction novels to page through.

"Alright," Steve replied into the phone. "Are you still docked at the Brooklyn Navy Yard?"

"Yes. We haven't moved."

"Okay." Steve thought for a moment. "I can be there tomorrow morning. Can you tell me what kind of proposition?"

There was a short silence on the other end and, when she spoke again, her voice was reluctant and lower in volume. "I think it's about forming an alliance between the Avengers and SHIELD."

Steve froze and Natasha abandoned the novel at his tensing, leaning forward with interest. "I see."

"I thought that you might," she said grimly. "Oh nine hundred, Steve. I'll meet you on deck."

"I'll see you there." Steve stared at the handset for a second before he finally hung up the phone. Natasha pounced.

"What did Hellfire Hill want?"

Steve shot her a look. "She informed me that Director Fury wants to meet with me tomorrow," he answered lightly. "About us rejoining SHIELD."

"Well, that's going to go over well," she muttered sarcastically. "I'm glad I'm not the one that has to tell Tony."

"Thanks." Steve watched her for a moment from beneath his lashes. "Hellfire Hill? I don't know that I've heard that story."
Natasha laughed. "Probably not. Maria developed a reputation a while back, when she started rising in the ranks. Her wrath was legendary. It didn't matter if you crossed her or not, if she was on the warpath, everyone knew it and whatever was wrong was fixed immediately."

She smiled at Steve. "Clint was on the receiving end of one of her lectures once and he said that it was like walking through hellfire."

"Hence the nickname," he reasoned, leaning back in the chair and crossing his arms. He grinned nostalgically and glanced over at the framed photo that sat on his nightstand. Natasha followed his gaze, eyes raking over the sepia toned image of Howard Stark, Bucky Barnes, Steve and Peggy Carter. "Reminds me of her," he said, nodding at the picture.

"Hill isn't Peggy," Natasha replied gently. Steve shook his head.

"No one is Peggy," he murmured, more to himself than to her. "Sometimes, I think that Peggy wasn't even Peggy, if that makes any sense."

She nodded, despite the fact that his eyes were locked on the photo. Tearing them away, he smiled lightly at her. "Still. I think I can handle one trip back."

"I'm sure you can," Natasha replied, more because Steve seemed to be expecting her to answer than anything else.

"Well." He placed his hands on his knees and stood. "I should find Clint and Tony. I'm sure they'll both have rather loud opinions about this."

Steve steeled himself as he left Natasha and walked down towards the labs. Pepper had taken Thor into New York City to show him around and teach him a little about the ways and cultures of the world that he was going to call home, and Bruce had locked himself in his lab with Howard Stark's notebooks after breakfast.

"I've heard your aim sucks." Steve paused at the lab entrance, listening to the taunting conversation on the other side of the glass. The soldier shook his head fondly as Clint's voice drifted down through the grate. "I bet you couldn't hit the broad side of a barn. In fact, I'm willing to bet a month's worth of chores."

Tony rolled his eyes, hunched over the skeleton of a gauntlet. Steve quietly punched in his key code, raising a brow in surprise when, instead of beginning the next set of verification protocols, the door opened of its own accord. "You don't do any chores, Barton."

"Neither do you," Steve interjected, stepping into the lab. "Did you finally get rid of those ridiculous security measures?"

"I had thought that it would induce Katniss up there to use the door like a real person, but so far, no dice."

"This way is more entertaining," Clint insisted.

"Don't you have an arc reactor to be finishing?" Steve asked Tony leadingly, crossing his arms. "I thought we discussed this."

Tony rolled his eyes, peeling off his shirt, to Clint's vehement objections. The new reactor gleamed brightly in the lighting of the lab and Tony tapped it gently for emphasis. "See? Good as new, thanks to your help."
Steve stared at the glowing disk. "How?"

"You were there, Spangles," Tony chastised lightly, pulling his shirt back on. He glanced up at Clint. "They say that the memory is the first thing to go."

Clint rolled his eyes at the billionaire. "How did you get it done so damned fast? It's been less than a month since you showed us."

"Not my first time," Tony reminded him, returning his attention to the gauntlet. "It's not like I didn't know how to build it already."

Steve placed both hands carefully on the desk, leaning towards Tony and forcing the billionaire to meet his gaze. "How did you get it put in?"

Tony blinked at Steve, weighing the merits of teasing the soldier further. Seemingly arriving at the conclusion that the entertainment would not outweigh the trouble, he answered. "It was an outpatient procedure at New York-Presbyterian. I brought the arc reactor, they put it in, I came back."

"So, when you said that you were going into the city for work," Clint mused aloud. "You were lying."

"Technically, since this was on Spangles's orders, that makes it work." Clint scoffed aloud disdainfully and Tony shrugged. "True."

"Whatever the reason, I'm glad it's in." Steve rubbed a hand across his forehead and finally looked up at Clint. He raised a brow at the sight of the vent grate. "It's locked again."

"Stark says this one is unpickable." The archer grinned. "I took that as a challenge."

Tony glanced up. "It'll take him at least three days. What did you want, Spangles?"

"Maria called and asked me to come in to headquarters."

Clint's affronted question of, "What for?" was marred by Tony's incredulous, "Who's Maria?"

Clint peered down through the grate. "Hill, dumbass. Maria Hill."

Tony's eyes lit with a maniacal fervor. "Spangles has a girlfriend that I don't know about? When did this happen?"

"She's not my girlfriend," Steve insisted, the tips of his ears darkening. Redirecting his attention to Clint, he answered the archer's question. "Fury wants to discuss the team joining forces with SHIELD again."

"No," Tony said immediately.

Steve sighed, thinking to himself that he could have phrased his announcement better. Bruce stepped in from his lab, adjusting his glasses on the bridge of his nose. "No what?"

Tony glared at Steve with a sense of betrayal as Natasha unlocked the lab door and slipped inside. "No, we will not be joining SHIELD again, ever."

"You didn't plan that well, did you?" she murmured to Steve.

"Not really, no," he retorted, rubbing a hand across his brow.
Natasha turned her attention to Tony. "We may have to."

Tony leaned back in his chair, one brow raised arrogantly to cover his growing ire. "And how do you figure that, Red?"

"Eventually, we're going to need access to their technology."

Tony's eyes narrowed to slits. "I made their technology. Try again."

"Space."

"I can buy half the country tomorrow, if I really wanted to," he pointed out sardonically. "And if you mean actual space and not earthly space, we have Thor."

Growing exasperated, Natasha huffed softly. "And what about government funding?"

Tony snorted. "Really? Are you kidding me?"

"How about protection?" Both Tony and Natasha raised their gazes to stare at Clint, who was lying lazily over the grate cover, idly picking the lock. "Under SHIELD jurisdiction, we'll have the legal backing to go after any target we like and absolution from any action we take while under orders. Without that, we're branded as vigilantes and tossed in jail the second they find us. No amount of Stark's money will save us from that."

His quiet proclamation was met with stunned silence for a few moments until Steve shifted. "Clint makes a very good point."

"Don't rub it in," Tony muttered mutinously.

"But," Steve continued, glaring lightly at the billionaire. "I think that we might need some ground rules before we throw our lot in with SHIELD again."

"I'm a little impressed with that, Spangles." Tony leaned forward, sharing a quick look with Bruce. "What did you have in mind?"

Steve grabbed two of the stools sitting by the wall. There was a soft click from above them and Clint tossed the vent grate to the side, flipping effortlessly down and shooting Tony a wide grin. He and Bruce pulled the couch over to form a makeshift circle with the other two.

"Wait," Bruce said suddenly. "Should we wait for Thor?"

Clint snorted. "He's a demi-god. What the fuck can they do to him?"

"It's a good point," Tony offered, shrugging. Steve set one stool down for Natasha and took the other for himself. He snagged one of the notebooks that Bruce had left on Tony's desk and pulled a pen from his breastpocket, shooting Tony a glare when the billionaire chuckled softly.

"It might be hypocritical of me, but I'm not particularly pleased with the idea of taking orders from them anymore, especially after finding out about some of the stunts they've tried to pull," Steve began. "So I think that we should be able to choose our own missions."

"Will they go for it?" Bruce asked dubiously. "That seems like we're asking a little much."

"They'll have to," Tony said grimly.

"I think it'll be okay," Steve assured the scientist. "If we're going to be honest, most of the big
conflicts will probably be things that we'd help out with anyway. We just need to make sure that we can help on our terms and not someone else's."

"Second?"

"Hands off Banner," Clint put in.

"And my suits," Tony added quickly.

Bruce smiled slightly. "Agreed."

Steve nodded, quickly jotting a few things down. "We aren't here by a signed contract. We should be allowed to leave at any time, if we feel that we are being taken advantage of or forced into something that we can't agree with."

"Fury's not going to be happy about this," Natasha murmured cautiously.

Tony scoffed. "I don't give a flying fuck."

Steve rolled his eyes at the billionaire and turned to Natasha. "I'll be putting it to him in gentler terms, of course."

"Why are you the one that's going?" Steve raised an eyebrow at Tony.

"Because, number one, they called me."

"You mean Maria called you," Clint muttered teasingly, earning a surprised glance from Bruce.

"And number two," Steve continued, ignoring them. "I'm more diplomatic than any of the rest of you. Except for maybe Bruce."

"Fair enough," Tony said.

Tony had sat in his lab for hours, trying to finish the last details on an equation that would, in practice, allow the Mark Forty-Three to withstand the vacuum of space and him to breathe while it was out there. The problem was that his brain insisted on rehashing the prospects of rejoining SHIELD and everything that the move would entail.

Thor and Pepper had been apprised of the situation when they'd returned from the city. Thor was ambivalent, appreciating Clint's appraisal of his situation, but informed them that he would stand with the rest of the team. Pepper had been less accepting, but ultimately agreed with Clint as well.

After spending an hour reworking his equation, Tony trashed the hologram in a huff and grabbed his coat. Steve had, at some point, installed a pegboard onto the wall and hung all of the keys for the various vehicles in a neat system. Grabbing the keys for his favorite Audi, Tony slipped the car out of the garage, absentmindedly noting that Steve's motorcycle was also gone, and pointed the car towards town.

Pulling into the first bar he found, he walked up to the counter and proceeded to drown his roiling thoughts with scotch for the next few hours, growing steadily more intoxicated.

The bartender watched with a dispassionate eye as the billionaire continued to loudly proclaim his grandeur to the bar at large. The declarations grew softer and more interspersed as Tony's head drooped lower and lower, finally hitting the bar with a thud.
Sighing, the bartender leaned across the counter and began rifling through Tony's pockets. Tony made a half-hearted protest, swatting ineffectually at the questing hands. Restraining the flailing appendages, the bartender retrieved the billionaire's phone.

"Unlock it, pal." Tony raised bleary eyes to him. "It's almost last call."

Frowning, he snatched his phone and punched in the code. "It's barely midnight," Tony corrected him hoarsely. "The night is young."

"Not for you," the bartender told him, stepping away to mix a couple of violently purple drinks for a pair of college-aged girls and taking the phone with him. "At this point, I'm impressed you haven't blacked out yet."

"I can hold my liquor," Tony muttered, pointing a finger at the bartender. "I've had excellent practice."

"That's great, pal," he replied absentmindedly, scrolling through the contacts. "You actually have a contact that's labeled 'Designated Driver'?"

Tony shrugged, an easy grin on his face. A live band began setting up on the small stage, the older men pulling out worn and well-played instruments. "The man's good at his job."

The bartender shook his head, initiating the call. It rang four times before a sleepy voice answered. "Hello?"

"Yeah, this is Mark, down at Rudy's Bar," he said, inching Tony's scotch further away. "You're the DD?"

"The what?"

"The designated driver," Mark repeated, keeping an eye on Tony.

"Oh. Yeah." There was shuffling at the other end and then a confused pause. "How did you know that?"

"That's what you're listed under in the contacts," Mark replied slowly. He heard a soft sigh.

"Of course I am," came the quiet murmur. "I'll be there in half an hour."

Mark turned his back to Tony, who was reaching for his glass. "Do I cut him off?"

There was a snort of laughter over the rustling movements. "There's no point. He'll just go somewhere else and drink there."

"Hey," Tony called, reaching blindly for the phone as Mark hung up. "Is that Spangles? Give me the phone!"

Mark rolled his eyes and tossed the cell onto the counter, leaving Tony to his own devices. The billionaire grabbed his phone and scrolled through the contacts again, jamming his finger at the screen. After a few seconds, he sat up a little straighter.

"Spangles? Hurry up! There's a hot grandma at the end of the bar that I think would be perfect for you."

He heard a pause on the other end, and then a distinctly not-Steve voice. "What the fuck are you
Tony squinted at his phone. "Barton? Why do you have Steve's phone?"

"I don't have his phone, stupid," Clint laughed. There was a soft 'oops' and the sound of glass breaking. "I will pay for that, I swear. Well, Stark's going to pay for that. I stole his credit card."

A quick glance at his wallet showed that Clint was being truthful. "How the fuck did you do that? And where are you, anyway?"

Clint chuckled. "Agent! And I'm at a bar."

"Hey, I'm at a bar!" Tony grinned and stood halfway up in his seat. "Mark bartender man who stole my phone! What bar am I at?"

Mark the Bartender rolled his eyes and leaned away from the busty co-ed he was flirting with. "Rudy's."

Tony turned back to the phone. "Yeah, I'm there. What's your bar called?"

"No fucking clue," came the slurred reply. Tony could hear shuffling and a few muffled curses on the other end of the line. "Hey, what bar am I at?"

Peering down the counter, Tony reared back in surprise. "You're at my bar!" Making a fist, he hammered on the lacquered wood to get Clint's attention.

"Hey!" Clint grinned widely at the sight of Tony and turned back to Mark. "That's my friend."

Mark watched the coed sashay back to her friends with dismay. "I don't fucking care." Reaching beneath the bar, he pulled out a bottle of whiskey. "Take this and go away."

Clint frowned at the bartender as he curled one hand around the bottle and hugged it to his chest like a football. "Fuck you too, asshat."

Tony leaned back on his stool, smiling. "Bring the booze, Barton. Spangles is on his way."

"Sweet." Clint stumbled down the bar. "Let's drink to that."

Bruce raised his head at the noise of someone descending the stairs into the garage and checked the clock. It was midnight, and there were few in the household that were usually awake and mobile at that hour. Shooting a glance at the occupant of his couch, Bruce rose and headed towards the garage. He poked his head out of the connecting space and quickly slipped through Tony's lab. Steve glanced at him, running a hand through his hair. "Hi."

Bruce gave Steve a quick once over, taking in his untied shoes and the unbuttoned plaid shirt hanging from his shoulders. "Going somewhere?"

"Tony is hopelessly drunk at some bar in town and the bartender called me to come get him," Steve answered, plucking the keys to the communal Audi from the pegboard on the wall, frowning when he noted that his bike's keys were gone, in addition to those of the Audi that Tony had taken. Turning to Bruce with a bit more attention, he cocked his head in question. "Everything okay with you?"

"Natasha is in my lab," Bruce replied without preamble. "She's been there for hours, just sitting on the couch."
Steve blinked at him, clearly not following. "Okay."

Bruce huffed, feeling the tension of the last few hours more than he liked. "Why?"

"She's trying to acclimate herself to you in the hopes that it will transfer to Hulk," Steve explained, hanging the keys back on the board in acknowledgement of the time that the conversation was going to take. "Hulk shook her."

Bruce let out a brittle laugh. "He does that to a lot of people."

Steve fixed him with a look that Bruce knew well, another tired variation of the soldier's We're-Going-To-Agree-To-Disagree face. "Nat doesn't often find things that shake her, and she knows that we're all a team, for better or worse. So she's trying to do her part."

Bruce sighed. "We don't know that that will work."

Steve's expression shifted from placating to stubborn in an instant. "Can't we try?"

Bruce bit his tongue so as not to startle the soldier with the vehemence of his response. "What if I hurt someone?"

"We would be there to protect anyone in harm's way," Steve replied immediately, clearly hopeful. "We could handle it."

"I'm not so sure," Bruce murmured, shaking his head.

Steve sighed. "Well, nothing is going to happen tonight. I have to go get Tony before he insults the wrong person, and Nat isn't going to do anything other than sit there. You'll be fine."

"I wasn't worried about me," Bruce muttered, almost petulant.

Steve retrieved the keys again, either not having heard him or forcibly choosing to ignore Bruce's parting shot, and drove out into the night. Bruce let out a breath and turned back to his lab.

Natasha hadn't moved from her position on the couch, although she had leaned over the sofa's arm to retrieve an abandoned sweater and wrap herself in it. She glanced up at Bruce's entrance with cool green eyes, but said nothing.

Steeling himself, he picked up a stool and moved it over to the couch, setting it down in front of her and taking a seat. Propping his feet on the bottom rung, he leaned his elbows on his knees and met her gaze. He took a moment to simply inspect her, finally reading the tension in her muscles and tightness around her eyes for the nervousness it was.

"Steve told me what your plan was."

Old habits seemed to die hard, and she could only suppress her sarcasm for so long. She arched one finely plucked brow at him. "How generous of him."

"I don't know if it will work," he said, ignoring her cynicism. She twitched slightly, and he felt guilty for inadvertently scaring her. "But I don't know if it won't, either. So let's just take this one day at a time, hm?"

Wordlessly, she nodded, never breaking her gaze and Bruce huffed aloud. "Are you going to stare at me forever, or just the rest of the night?"

"Tonight," she quipped immediately. "Forever is too long to stare at anyone's face."
"I'm telling Clint that," he muttered, rubbing a hand across his face. "Look, I'm not a wild animal. You don't have to make eye contact with me to assert yourself."

Her face remained impassive, but the corners of her eyes crinkled in a smile. "It's a habit."

Bruce could only snort, and pushed himself into a standing position. He left the stool open and returned to his desk, settling into a companionable silence with the red-haired assassin on his couch.

By the time Steve had arrived, Clint and Tony were down a quarter of the bottle and both leaning on the bar for support, surrounded by a group of laughing young ladies. Passing the relieved bartender a generous tip, Steve pocketed his wallet and slowly made his way down the bar.

"Steve!" Tony's cry startled the girls and they fluttered anxiously around him like butterflies as he pushed through the crowd. "You have to meet Sarah."

Steve resisted the urge to plant his feet, letting Tony drag him past where Clint was entertaining their groupies to the back of the bar. "Who's Sarah?"

"She's what you would call a babe," Tony replied, his grin threatening to split his cheeks. Stopping in front of one of the back booths, he frowned. "You do call women babes, right? Or are they dames?"

"It's either, darling," the lady in the booth answered with a laugh and Steve's brows shot into his hairline. Her voice was strong, but rough with age, and she looked like she belonged more at a quilting club than the country bar they were in, dressed in lavender lace and pearls. She smiled slyly at the men, taking a sip of her Manhattan. "But I prefer the term fox."

Steve colored slightly, shyly returning her laughing grin. "Tony, what are you doing?"

"Well, Clint says that you wouldn't date any of the agents, so you're sad and lonely and I am going to fix that for you. Hence, Sarah. She's just your type, all old-fashioned and respectable," Tony replied with equability. At Steve's hissed "Tony," the billionaire waggled his brows at her. "And a fox."

"Thank you, dear." She tipped her glass to him, eyes sparkling.

Steve gave her a half smile, somewhat apologetic. "Tony, I can't go out with her."

"Why the fuck not?" Tony reared back in irritation and nearly lost his balance. Steve looped an arm around him for support and rolled his eyes at Tony's frown. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-seven," the soldier replied with some confusion.

"Plus the sixty-six years in ice and two out of it makes ninety-five," Tony crowed. "Sarah isn't a day over seventy and that means, if anything, you're robbing the cradle, you dog you. Math wins again."

Sarah burst into gravelly laughter, both at Tony's expression of pure triumph and Steve's look of utter shock.

"Tony." Steve's voice held a pleading quality to it. "I think it's time we go home."

The billionaire's eyes flashed and Steve let out a groan. "Are you rejecting her? How could you? That's no way to treat a lady, Captain America."

Steve slapped a hand over Tony's mouth and forced the smaller man to meet his eyes as Sarah continued to chuckle at them. "Tony, I can't go out with her because she is married."
Tony blinked twice at him and then shifted his gaze to where Sarah was waving her left hand, her wedding ring flashing gold in the dim light of the bar. Pulling Steve's hand away, he backpedalled. "I had no idea that was there."

Steve rolled his eyes. "Of course you didn't."

"Thank you boys," Sarah interjected, gasping with laughter. "I don't think I've been this entertained in years."

The guitarist from the live band ended the set and joined them, dropping an unmistakably possessive kiss on Sarah's upturned lips. "Evening, boys," he greeted them.

Tony cocked his head at the exchange, still leaning heavily on Steve. "Huh."

"It's nice to meet you, sir," Steve replied, shifting Tony's weight to free his right hand. After a few seconds, he held it out. "We were just having a nice conversation with your wife."

"I'd noticed," the musician said dryly, gripping Steve's hand in a firm shake as the soldier blushed slightly. "I haven't seen Sarah laugh like since the seventies." His eyes narrowed. "I'm a mighty jealous man, just so you know."

Tony snorted as she swatted at him playfully. "Oh stop teasing them, Frank. They're just having a spot of fun and entertaining a sad old lady."

Steve smiled kindly. "I don't think you're a sad old lady, ma'am."

"A charmer, eh?" Frank settled himself into the booth and took a sip of the warming beer that sat to Sarah's left. "I'll be keeping an eye on you."

"That won't be necessary," Sarah broke in smoothly as Tony geared himself for a fight. "I'm sure that I'll be safe with Captain Rogers while you have fun with your little band."

Frank glanced at Steve with fresh eyes. "I suppose you're a man I can trust," he said slowly, his tone sobering. "Thank you, for what you did."

Steve demurred. "It was nothing."

"It was something to a lot of people, son," Frank insisted. Flicking his eyes at Tony and then his watch, he nodded towards the bar. "If your friend can sit on his own, I'd like to buy you a drink."

Tony, inexplicably recognizing the sentiment of the situation, grinned lazily. "There's a stool at the bar calling my name."

Steve sighed. "Tony, that's not a barstool. That's Clint."

"Oh." Tony shoved at Steve's supportive grip and freed himself. "Even better, then."

Steve talked with Sarah and Frank until nearly last call, trading old war stories and hearing about history firsthand from people who held beliefs that were more familiar to him. When it came time to collect Tony and Clint, they were nowhere to be found.

"I'm sure they're fine," Sarah assured him as Frank helped the band pack up the rest of their gear.

He smiled weakly at her, running a hand through his hair. "I mean no offense, Sarah, but you don't know them very well."
She smiled. "That's true, son, but I've had three boys myself. They can't have gone far. Let me ask Mark."

"Thank you," he said sincerely. "I'm going to check the restrooms again."

His thorough inspection gave him no more clues than a cursory glance had and he was beginning to feel frustrated. Striding back into the bar, he found Sarah sitting at the bar with both his wayward charges.

"How?" he stammered, swatting Clint's hands away from the bottle of whiskey they'd miraculously not finished.

She smiled mysteriously, inclining her head. "Three boys, Captain. I know a thing or two about men."

"Oh," Clint slurred with a grin, turning around on his barstool. "I think I could take that as an invitation."


Ignoring their blatant protests, Steve managed a sincere goodbye to both Sarah and Frank, promising to keep in touch and tucking their phone number into his pocket. Forcing the two wobbly men into their coats, he bundled them into the Audi he'd driven, looking longingly at the bike he was leaving behind.

"Clint, the next time that you borrow my bike without asking, I'm not holding back when we spar," he threatened as he slid into the driver's seat and turned the engine over.

Clint giggled in response, lounging over his half of the backseat. "If you can find me, Cap'n. And that's a big if."

"I'm going to fit you with a GPS one day," Steve muttered darkly.

Tony's eyes lit up from his spot next to Clint. "Oh, that sounds fun."

Clint glared at him. "No," he replied flatly, clearly not too drunk to recognize the seriousness of the idle warning.

"Then stop wandering off," Steve cut in, effectively ending the conversation.

Clint continued to glare mutinously at him from the backseat until he turned the radio on. Tony began to hum tunelessly along to the classic rock station and Clint removed his seatbelt, to Steve's vocal disapproval. The archer lurched into the front seat, bracing himself on the center console, and fiddled with the tuner until he found the local country station. Sitting back in his seat, he buckled his seat belt again, singing softly to the old Garth Brooks song that was playing.

Steve flicked his eyes up and met Clint's in the rearview mirror. "Really?"

"Really," Clint affirmed, bobbing his head to the music.

Tony was gaping openly at him, his expression slightly horrified. "It's like I don't even know you," he whispered, curling into the corner of the seat. "Barton, we have to rectify your taste in music."

"I'm impressed that you can even pronounce that at this point," Steve muttered from the front seat, flipping on the brights.
Clint, on the other hand, was glaring at Tony. "There is nothing wrong with country music."

"There is everything wrong with it," Tony protested. Gesturing wildly at the stereo, he asked, "Do you hear that twang? Do you? That's the worst sound on the planet."

"As opposed to nails on a chalkboard or repetitive beeping," Steve murmured.

"Your shitty assed Black Sabbath is worse than this," Clint announced and Tony gasped aloud in shock.

"Take it back!"

Clint crossed his arms and looked out of the window. "No."

"I will pull this car over, I swear to God Almighty," Steve warned.

Tony turned his attention to the soldier. "Do you hear what he's saying? Do you?"

"If you two can't agree on a radio station, then I'm going put on NPR and be done with it."

The two drunkards settled down, united in their feelings of betrayal, and Steve drove quietly home. They fell asleep somewhere in the forest on the way home and Steve switched the radio off, driving in silence to the mansion. Bruce stepped out of his lab when the garage door opened, raising a brow at Steve's haggard face when he emerged from the car.

"Don't you have an appointment tomorrow?"

"Don't remind me." Steve advised as Tony and Clint began to rouse, both still clearly intoxicated. "Could you help get Tony upstairs to bed? I don't want to wake up Pepper and I have Clint to take care of too."

"Of course." Bruce hurried over, helping Tony unbuckle his belt and offering him a shoulder to lean on. "Nat is still in my lab."

Clint grinned happily. "Tasha!"

"Bed," Steve told him inexorably. "I'm putting you in your room and I'll put her in hers later. What you do after that is your business."

"I could tell you a few things," Clint said, smiling lecherously and Steve rolled his eyes as he looped an arm around Clint's waist.

"Please don't."

Steve painstakingly helped Clint up to the ground floor. The archer broke from Steve's grip in the lounge and stumbled to the couch, humming happily as he snuggled into the cushions. He quickly dropped off to sleep again and Steve gently draped a blanket over him, shaking his head in fond exasperation.

"Tony?" he asked Bruce when he met the scientist on the second floor.

"Couch," Bruce replied succinctly. "Clint?"

"Also couch," Steve informed him. "I'm going to grab Nat and then fix breakfast for everyone before I head out."
Bruce sighed softly, rubbing tiredly at his eyes. "You know, you don't have to take care of us," he said in a strained voice. "We're all adults."

Bruce looked up to find Steve looking at him with a curious mix of disbelief and affront. "You're my team," Steve reiterated. "And someone has to take care of you, because it looks to me like you could all use it, one way or another."

Clapping Bruce on the shoulder, he smiled gently. "Get some sleep. You look exhausted."

Continuing along the hallway, Steve forcibly did not turn back to see the expression on Bruce's face. Stepping quietly into Tony's lab, he saw that Dum-E had rolled over and had a blanket clutched in its claw, carefully dragging it from the back of the couch to rest over Tony. He stepped forward and adjusted the blanket to cover Tony better, grinning quickly at the robot's whir of approval.

Natasha was curled in a ball on the couch, dwarfed in one of Bruce's sweaters. She woke at his pointed approach, peering up at him with sleepy eyes. She mumbled something and cuddled deeper into the sweater.

Steve crouched down next to the couch, resting his elbows on his knees for balance. "Would you rather be in your bed or stay on this couch?"

She sighed softly, pulling her face from the crook of her elbow, and answered with a slight glare that he took to mean he was being oblivious. "Bed."

"Are you going to move?" he asked with amusement after a few minutes of stillness.

"No," she groaned. "Too far."

Steve bit his lip and weighed his options. "Will you punch me if I carry you upstairs?"

She opened her eyes and stared at him for a moment, clearly thinking. "No."

"Alright then," he murmured, rising. "Remember that in a second, would you?"

Sliding his right arm beneath her neck and his left under her bent knees, he straightened easily and marveled at the amount of trust she was displaying. Turning sideways to fit through the doors that JARVIS automatically opened at his request, he carried Natasha to her bedroom and managed to twist her doorknob himself. He set her gently down and covered her with the throw blanket at the end of her bed.

"Thank you," she mumbled as he stepped back into the hallway and he smiled.

"Any time," he assured her. Pausing at Thor's door, he sighed to himself and knocked once decisively. There was a soft thump and the door swung open after a couple of minutes. Thor peeked tiredly out.

"Is anything amiss, my friend?"

Steve shook his door further, leaning against the doorjamb and looking mildly more awake. "Of course. What do you require?"

"I was out all night with Clint and Tony, and I had to drive them home," Steve explained. "Clint
borrowed my bike and we left it at the bar, and I would really appreciate it if you could just fly out and get it." He paused. "You can do that, right?"

Thor chuckled softly. "Of course. If you would show me where this bar is, I will retrieve your motorcycle for you."

"I really appreciate it," Steve repeated. "I'll start breakfast while you're gone."

"And Pop Tarts?" Thor asked, smiling mischievously.

Steve laughed. "And Pop Tarts," he promised, heading towards his door. "Come on. I'll show you where it is."

Thor followed the soldier into his room and opened a map in the browser on his tablet, showing Thor where the bar was in relation to the mansion and what it looked like from overhead. Thor left with a reiterated promise of retrieving Steve's bike and Steve watched him take off from the backyard, Mjölnir in hand.

After a quick shower and a check on his charges, he began preparing the largest, greasiest meal he could think of and Thor's promised Pop Tarts. The demi-god returned with his motorcycle as he was pulling the last pair from the toaster, and he simply handed the plate of pastries to Thor with his thanks.

"When they wake up, they're going to be starving," he warned Thor after he'd finished cooking, setting large platters of breakfast food in the oven to keep warm. "And probably angry. So please don't take offense to anything that they say and just point them in the direction of the food."

"I am well versed in the aftereffects of mead and ale, my friend," Thor assured him with a smile. "I will make sure that they are all fed and taken care of."

Steve grinned, relieved. "Thanks, Thor. I'll see you all later today."

Pocketing his phone and his wallet, Steve pulled on his heavy leather jacket and left with a wave. It was all quiet for a few minutes, wherein Thor polished off the plate of Pop Tarts and inspected a biscuit while he waited for the coffee to finish percolating, and then the phone rang.

Clint's arm appeared over the back of the couch, slowly followed by the rest of his body. He blinked blearily at Thor, his gaze zeroing in on the biscuit in the demi-god's hand, and then turned his attention to the phone that was still ringing merrily on the table. Sighing, he answered it.

"Yeah?" he croaked out. Thor rose and poured two cups of coffee, picking up the bottle of ibuprofen that Steve had insisted Clint and Tony would need. He handed Clint one of the coffees and the bottle, to which he groaned gratefully. "Wait, back up, what?"

"Did you hear anything I said, Barton?"

Maria Hill's voice was crisp with frustration and Clint rubbed a fist across his eyes, cradling the phone in the crook of his shoulder as he tried to pry the cap off of the bottle. "Not really. I'm a little hungover."

Maria sighed. "It's comforting to know that you can still do that with all the practice you've had drinking. I'm just checking to make sure that Steve remembered his appointment this morning."

"Are you a fucking secretary at a doctor's office now?" Clint groused, still struggling with the pill bottle. "Did I miss that memo?"
"No, Barton, I am still second in command of SHIELD," Maria sniped as Thor plucked the bottle from Clint's hands. The archer glared at him when the demi-god was also foiled by the childproofing until he simply ripped the cap from the rest of the bottle and handed it back to Clint.

The archer mouthed 'thank you' to Thor, who inclined his head and returned to his coffee. "Then what the fuck is this?"

"I'm just checking," she answered. "Fury's been on a rampage in preparation for this meeting and I don't want to be in the warpath if you've made Steve miss it."

Clint gulped down two pills with a swig of coffee and frowned at the phone. "What makes you think it'd be my fault? And since when is it 'Steve' to you?"

"Because you're the one with the biggest issue with SHIELD at the moment, except for Stark, and since he told me to, Barton. Not that it's any of your business."

Clint had been reading people long enough to know that there was something off about her tone, a spy long enough to know that she was holding something back, and friends with her long enough to know that it was important. "Don't bullshit me, Maria, and don't you dare think that there won't be repercussions for what you do to him."

There was a significant pause on the other end of the line, and Maria's voice was carefully lethal when she spoke again. "What precisely, Barton, do you think I'm going to be doing to Captain Rogers?"

"It doesn't matter," he insisted, vaguely aware that he was treading dangerous waters. "This guy is Phil's hero -,

"I am well aware of who he is, Clint," Maria cut in angrily. "What you need to remember is who I am. I'm not the kind of person that's going to do anything to that man, and I'm not going to let anything else happen to him. Not because you're threatening me, or because Phil wouldn't approve, but because Steve is my friend too. So shut the hell up."

With a click, the call was disconnected and Clint scowled at the silent handset. Finally raising his gaze, he blinked at Natasha's sudden presence and impassive face. She shook her head slowly at him.

"You're an idiot."

He glared at her as she turned and accepted a cup of coffee from Thor, murmuring her thanks. "I'm not an idiot," he protested.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Yes, you are. What reason do you have to mistrust Maria? What reason have you ever had?"

"It's not like she's cared about us since we left," he muttered rebelliously after a short, uncomfortable pause. Natasha sighed, rolling her eyes, and his glower deepened. "What?"

"Are you upset that she hasn't called you?" She tutted at him. "Careful. I may get jealous."

"Are you saying she's called you?" he asked angrily, blindly accepting the plate of food that Thor shoved inexorably into his hands.

"Of course she has," Natasha answered blithely, waving at the newly arrived Pepper. "She and I have talked at least once a week since we left."
Clint blinked owlishly at her, diverting his attention to his breakfast. "I didn't know that. She didn't call me."

"You didn't call her, either," Natasha pointed out ruthlessly. "I get that you're wary about rejoining SHIELD, I really do."

Pepper frowned at them, setting her plate on the coffee table and delicately dropping to the rug. "I thought that you were alright with the decision," she interjected hesitantly. "That it would be a better choice in the long run."

"He still thinks that," Natasha offered matter-of-factly, ignoring Clint's narrowed stare. "He's just now realizing that we're going to be assigned a SHIELD liaison, which is basically a handler, and remembering what it was like the last time he worked with a handler that wasn't Phil."

Thor glanced between the assassins. "I shall assume that it did not end well."

"That's a nice way of putting it," Natasha agreed. Clint set his plate on the floor, intending to escape the conversation, and she raised her brow in amusement. "I wouldn't do that, if I were you. I remember your issues with equilibrium after a long night of drinking."

Pepper eyed Clint's green face with concern as he lowered himself back onto the couch. The archer studiously avoided his partner's gaze as the conversation developed around him with the entrances of both Bruce and Tony, but his mind was on Steve's visit to the helicarrier and, oddly, Phil.

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To be continued in Chapter Eight.
"You must remember, family is often born of blood, but it doesn't depend on blood. Nor is it exclusive of friendship. Family members can be your best friends, you know. And best friends, whether or not they are related to you, can be your family."

— Trenton Lee Stewart, *The Mysterious Benedict Society*

"The most important thing in life is your family. There are days you love them, and others you don't, but in the end they're the people you always come home to. Sometimes it's the family you're born into, and sometimes it's the one you make for yourself."

— Candice Bergen, *Sex and the City*

**Chapter Eight**

Maria met him on the deck, as promised, and Steve let out a whistle at the frown on her face. Maneuvering his bike around a parked Quinjet, he disembarked and joined her.

"Good morning, Maria," he began cautiously. "How are you?"

"I may kill Barton," she seethed. "You don't really need a sniper, do you?"

Steve shrugged. "We could do without, I suppose, but we're all so attached to him that I'd rather you let him live."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "That sounded remarkably like something Stark would say. I take it you've fixed that situation?"

Allowing her to change the subject, Steve nodded. "I think we're really coming together," he admitted. "Thor arrived a couple of weeks ago and he's settling in well."

She nodded. "We noted activity that's consistent with what was recorded when he arrived before the battle. I'm glad to hear that everything is coming together."

Living with Natasha and Pepper had given him some insight into the female psyche, but Steve knew that his next comment was hit or miss. "You might try telling your face that."

There was a split second where he thought that she was going to slap him and he prepared for the impact, but she merely slumped her shoulders and sighed. "I am glad, really," she insisted. "I just haven't had that great of a morning."

"Care to talk about it?"

She shook her head immediately. "There no point to burdening you with my problems," she said firmly. "Besides, the director is waiting for you."

Turning, she left the deck and entered the door behind her, motioning Steve inside. They walked amiably through the halls, Steve waving at a few familiar faces as they passed, until they reached Director Fury's office.
Maria knocked twice on the door, opening it at Fury's call. "It's your show," she murmured as Steve passed her on his way inside. "Good luck."

Steve stepped inside the office, keeping his spine perfectly straight and his shoulders back, somewhat wary. "Good morning, Director Fury."

"Good morning, Captain," Fury replied, inclining his head as he remained seated behind his desk. He gestured at the chair in front of him. "Have a seat, please."

Steve laid his jacket over the back and sat, aware of Fury's constant gaze. Meeting the director's eye unfalteringly, he kept his face carefully blank. "Was there something specific that you needed from me?"

Fury laced his fingers together and leaned forward slightly. "I wanted to talk to you about the possibility of the Avengers rejoining SHIELD."

"And?" Steve prompted when he said nothing else. Fury's eye twitched, almost imperceptibly, in what Steve decided was irritation.

"Do you have any thoughts on the matter?"

"Actually, I have plenty of thoughts on it," Steve admitted, pulling the list of conditions that he and the others had worked up from his jacket pocket. "And so do the others."

Fury looked vaguely taken aback. "I wasn't aware that you had a mind reader on the team."

"We don't," Steve replied with a small smile. "What we do have are six very smart people who figured that something like this was coming. We simply prepared for the inevitable."

He extended his arm, holding the packet of papers out to Fury, who took it with a raised eyebrow and began a cursory inspection of the demands. His expression never wavered, but Steve got the sense that he was more than a little irritated by one or two of the items that Clint and Tony had insisted on. After a few long minutes, he folded the list and raised his eyes to Steve.

"I think that can be managed," he said. "I'll have a contract drawn up. Agent Hill will bring it by."

"Actually, sir, Tony's lawyers are already working on one." Steve smiled guilelessly at him. "We'll have them send it along when we've signed it."

Fury pursed his lips and nodded tightly. "Then it looks like we're almost finished."

"You'll need a liaison," Fury added, and Steve glanced dubiously at him.

"Handler," Fury corrected himself, leaning back in his chair, looking marginally more in control of the situation. "Someone to keep tabs on the team and act as a go-between for you and me."

"I am aware of what you mean," Steve murmured, reining in his temper. He sat quietly for a moment, a little wrinkle between his brows. "I'll need to discuss this with the others," he finally said. Fury raised an eyebrow at him. "You're the team leader," he reminded gently.

"That doesn't matter," Steve insisted with a sense of stubbornness that being friends with Tony only
seemed to exacerbate. "I never agreed to anything without consulting the Commandos first. I'm not going to change that with the Avengers."

Fury's expression looked like he was torn between exasperation and admiration, and he eventually wiped both emotions from his face. "You'll let me know what's decided?"

"Of course," Steve agreed easily, standing. He smiled wryly at the director. "It might take some time to come to an agreement though. Sometimes it takes us two hours just to decide on what we're having for dinner."

Murmuring a cursory goodbye to the director, Steve excused himself and exited the office. Maria was standing just outside the door and he smiled amusedly at her. "Were you waiting for me?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "How did it go?"

He shrugged, pulling his jacket on as he started towards the deck of the helicarrier. "As well as could be expected," he informed her. "I think we're going to end up rejoining, but there will be rules to it."

"I'd expect nothing less from Stark and Barton," she replied with a small laugh. "How did Fury take that?"

"I think he was close to bursting a vein in his forehead," Steve admitted and she laughed aloud. "He said something about a liaison, too."

His comment sobered her slightly. "Yes, I had thought that was going to be an issue."

Steve sighed heavily, ducking out of the path of a trio of agents. "I'm not looking forward to that conversation."

"Trust Nat and Barton," she advised. "They are really the ones that you have to worry about, and they'll have a better idea of who will and won't fit."

Pausing before the door to the deck, he turned to her. "Thanks for the suggestion."

"Anytime," she murmured, smiling genuinely at him and Steve, strangely, felt the tips of his ears reddening. He opened his mouth to say something, anything, when 'The Star Spangled Man' burst cheerfully from his pocket. He closed his eyes in embarrassment and Maria tried to stifle her laughter behind her hand.

Reaching into his pocket, he retrieved his cellphone and answered the call. "What?"

"Does this mean that it didn't go well?" Tony's voice blasted quickly through the line. "Thor is on standby, in case he needs to make a point."

"Thor does not need to make a point, Tony," Steve interjected with exasperation, leaning heavily against the bulkhead.

"Oh." Tony's voice turned sly. "Did I interrupt something?"

"No," Steve replied through clenched teeth, to Maria's amusement.

Tony sighed. "Pity. Then you can come home. And pick up some pizza on your way."

Steve rubbed a hand across his brow. "You realize that I'm on my bike and it will probably be frozen by the time I get home, right?"
"Based on thermodynamics, probably not completely frozen," Tony hedged.

"Tony."

"I really want Ray's and Pepper won't be back for hours," he whined. "We'll reheat it in the oven. Pretty please?"

"Oh God, you said please," Steve muttered, raising a brow as Maria burst into laughter, unable to keep quiet any longer. "How many drinks have you had?"

"Enough to warrant wanting Ray's," Tony replied succinctly. "I'll never forgive you if you forget it."

"Fine," Steve capitulated. "Text me the order. Or, better yet, place it with Ray's and I'll just pick it up on the way."

"You got it, Spangles. Stark out."

Steve disconnected the call with a shake of his head and glanced over to find that Maria's laughter had finally petered out and she was looking at him with a mixture of fond pride and something that seemed oddly like sadness.

"What?"

She shook her head, raising a forestalling hand. "It's nothing."

He gave her a look that clearly indicated he didn't believe her. "Come on."

"It's nothing, really," she insisted. "It's just that, well. You called it home."

Steve paused, taken aback as his brain raced through his conversation to remember what he'd said. "I guess I did," he murmured.

She smiled softly. "Phil would be so happy."

They were quiet for a minute or two, each lost in their own thoughts, before the moment was broken by an agent entering from the flight deck. She visibly rallied herself.

"You should get going if you're going to appease Stark in a timely manner."

Steve nodded. "If he's hungry enough to be calling me, Clint must be starving."

"That's never good for anyone," she put in sagely.

He smiled at her as he stepped out onto the deck, heading towards his bike. "I'll see you around, Maria."

The ride to shore was quick and the pizzas were nearly ready when he arrived at Ray's, so he was on the road in less than an hour. By the time Steve returned to the mansion, his head was full of questions about their new position and the daunting task of finding a new handler, and, oddly Maria. Pulling into the garage to a small explosion and Tony's whoops of delight, discussing a new handler was, suddenly, the last thing on his mind.

"Spar with me."

Steve looked up from the book he was reading, blinking bemusedly at the sight of Clint in his
doorway for the twelfth time in three days. The archer sighed, crossing his arms and leaning back against the doorjamb.

"Spar with me please?"

"While that is better," Steve murmured, marking his place with a finger. "I'm still not sure that I'm following."

Clint raised a brow at him. "You do know what sparring is, right, Old Timer?"

Steve's eyes narrowed in a black glare. "You do know that I can refuse to feed you, right?"

Clint sighed again, stepping further into the room and shoving Steve's feet to the side to make room for himself at the end of the bed. "I'm bored," he informed the soldier as he reclined against the wall. "And I'm either going to bother Stark to the point of distraction, which, I would like you to know, I have been restraining myself on."

"I'm so proud," Steve mumbled.

"Or I'm going to get riotously drunk," Clint finished, ignoring Steve's jibe. "Which option would you prefer?"

"Fine." Steve placed a bookmark in between his pages. "I'd rather you beat up on me than annoy Tony to the point of physical violence."

Clint snorted. "Like he could hurt me."

Steve stopped and stared meaningfully at the archer. "Precisely."

Clint grinned, bounding on the balls of his feet as Steve pulled on a warm pair of socks. He glanced over at Clint, finally realizing that the archer was dressed in his uniform.

"There is no way the training rooms are finished."

Clint shook his head. "Thor, unsurprisingly, is good with a hammer, so Tony has him out back building the frame."

"It's about damned time," Steve muttered to himself. "I'll change into my uniform too and meet you out front. Sound okay?"

"Hurry up," Clint replied as an answer and ducked out of the room.

Steve quickly changed into his uniform and met Clint on the gravel of the front drive. "Do you think that this is going to be okay?"

Clint shrugged, hopping lightly up and down. "It's fine. Come on."

"You're like a child," Steve commented, rolling his eyes.

Clint barked a laugh. "Kids don't do this."

Steve had seen Clint fight before, both in battle and in a training setting with Natasha, knew something of the archer's strength for himself, but none of that prepared him for the force behind Clint's fist. He swore he felt his teeth rattle and Clint gave him a feral grin.

"I told you I was bored," he reminded Steve.
Steve frowned in response. "Yes, but you forgot to mention that you've been itching for a fight."

"Too much for you, old man?"

Steve's eyes narrowed and he lunged forward, anticipating Clint's feint and catching the archer with a left jab. The pair traded blows for an indeterminate amount of time before the hairs on Steve's arms rose with warning. Turning, he blocked a kick from Natasha and dropped to a knee when Clint used her arrival to his advantage, landing a blow to the back of his leg.

"Ganging up on the old man, are you?"

"It's good for you," Natasha told him, feinting left to allow Clint to strike from the right.

Steve hopped back and glared at them. Grinning devilishly, he turned slightly to the side and kept his eyes on the assassins. "Thor!"

"Damn it," Clint cursed as the demi-god hurtled around the corner of the mansion. "That's cheating!"

Thor glanced curiously from Steve to the assassins. "What is cheating?"

"We're sparring and you're on my team," Steve informed Thor with a hint of glee.

Thor grinned back at the soldier and executed a slight bow towards Clint and Natasha. "Shall we?"

With a glance at each other and a nod, Natasha launched herself at Steve and Clint took on Thor. Neither assassin held back, but it was clear to any outside observer that Clint's attacks on Thor were slightly more intense than was strictly necessary. To his credit, the demi-god simply absorbed the force of each impact with calm composure, deflecting a few and allowing Clint to work out his frustrations and grief until the archer simply stopped.

Natasha immediately halted her assault on Steve's defenses, turning to Clint with concern in her eyes. He breathed heavily for a moment and finally extended a hand to Thor. "Not bad, big guy."

"You as well," Thor rumbled, clasping Clint's hand in the tradition of a warrior.

Clint turned to Steve. "Thanks for the workout. Same time tomorrow?"

Steve smiled in fond exasperation. "Sure thing, Clint."

He motioned to Thor and they turned to leave when Clint cried out in surprise. They glanced back to find Natasha attempting to kick Clint's legs from beneath him. She managed to pin him, crowing triumphantly. Clint rolled them and she twisted with the momentum, slithering through his hold and pinning him again.

Steve had to admit that the pair was formidable as Natasha let Clint up and they traded a few blows. Thor eyed them intensely, tracking their movements. Steve watched with amusement as Clint deliberately gentled his blows before they landed on Natasha, making them more warning shots than anything else.

When she pinned him for a third time, Thor made a strangled noise in the back of his throat. "Does she ever lose?" he murmured.

"No," Steve replied laughingly. "He lets her win."

"Hey," Clint protested from his prone position. He frowned at Natasha's grin and in one swift movement, had rolled them both so that he was pinning her. "I do not!"
He grinned at Steve, relaxing his muscles so that Natasha could pin him again. The soldier turned to Thor. "Yes, he does. It makes her feel better."

"Keep talking like that, Rogers, and I'll prove that I'm the better one," she threatened from her position atop Clint. Tony emerged from the garage, looking rather disgruntled. He eyed the scene before him and a lecherous grin slid lazily across his face.

"Don't let me stop you."

Natasha speared him with a glare. "We won't. What are you doing out?"

"I programmed JARVIS to alert me when my five days are almost up," he informed her. "So I'm here for my requisite people time."

Her eyes flashed and she settled more firmly on Clint's chest, ignoring his 'oof' of discomfort. "And it only took one sedation," she murmured. "Pity."

"It was less of your sedation and more of the threat of being tossed over Point Break's shoulder," Tony correct, rubbing at his arms for warmth as he walked closer to the group. "Not a fan."

"I cannot say that I blame you, my friend," Thor said with amusement, grinning at Steve's soft chuckles. Glancing back at the garage, his brow furrowed. "Where is Banner?"

"Sleeping," Tony answered. "He's passed out on his couch. Is that even comfortable, Barton?" he asked, craning his neck to view Clint's position better.

"Not particularly," Clint wheezed. He slapped at Natasha's thigh. "Up now."

She ginned devilishly at him. "Make me."

The other's watched with mild surprise as Clint surged to the side, cupping one hand on the back of Natasha's head to protect it from the gravel drive. She hooked her legs around his waist as he got to his knees and smoothly rose to a standing position, still holding her in his grasp.

"Down," he said inexorably, ignoring Tony's impressed whistle, and she unclasped her legs from his torso with a wrinkled nose.

"You need to shower," she told him, heading into the house. "You smell awful."

"Hey," Tony interjected, pointing a finger at Clint. "The showers are not big enough for two here."

Clint grinned as Thor asked a blushing Steve what Tony was talking about. "That's what you think."

His shower had been relaxing and, sadly, occupied only by himself. Running a towel through his short hair, Clint dropped it on his bed and pulled out his bow case. His bow had been unused since the Battle of New York and it gleamed dully in the dying sunlight outside his window. Sighing, he ran a hand along the curve.

Shaking his head at himself, he opened the second compartment and pulled out his Glock. Sneaking into Natasha's room, he grinned at the sound of her singing in the shower and stole her cleaning kit. Settling into his desk chair, he began to disassemble his weapon and work mindlessly at his task. Natasha walked in after a quarter of an hour, smelling like lilac and honey.

"So," she began casually, and Clint immediately felt his muscles involuntarily tense at her tone. "You've been hanging out with Steve a lot lately."
Clint felt an easy smirk slide onto his face as her arms snaked around his neck to take the gun chamber he was cleaning from his hand. "Jealous?"

"Not remotely." She stole a cleaning cloth from his kit and settled herself on his bed.

"Then why bring it up?"

"Curiosity." She shrugged, rubbing at a particularly stubborn spot. Clint accepted her answer and turned back to cleaning. He could feel her frown behind him and nearly smiled when she finally leaned forward to poke at his back. "So?"

He sighed, setting the clip he was inspecting on the desk, and turned around. "He reminds me of Phil.

"He's not Phil, I know that," he murmured, raising a hand to stem her sympathetic objection. "And it's not everything he does that reminds me of him, but sometimes Steve is so like Phil that it just hurts. And I seem to be a masochist."

She nodded quietly, focusing her gaze on the cloth in her hand, the chamber long abandoned. "It makes sense when you think about it, I guess."

"Of course it does," he replied. "Phil modeled himself after Steve, so of course, they're alike."

"Well," she finally said after a few moments of silence. "Just let Tony know that that's what it is."

He stared at her as she hopped off of the bed. "What the fuck for?"

"He's been on a rampage lately, according to Bruce." She raised an eyebrow at him and he had the feeling that he should have known this. "He thinks it's because you're not trading barbs with him from the vents anymore."

"Tasha," he began leadingly, rolling his eyes. "We don't talk about that kind of shit."

"Then don't talk about it," she told him as she slipped out of the door. "Fix it."

To be perfectly honest, Clint had no clue how to fix whatever was wrong with Tony. The billionaire was an enigma, with just enough arrogance wrapped in to make him prickly, which generally did not bode well for whoever was talking to him.

"Barton," Tony barked from the door to the sub-basement, bringing Clint from his reverie. "Downstairs."

Clint raised an eyebrow curiously at him and shared a look with Steve. "No?"

"If you don't come downstairs," Tony huffed testily. "Then you don't get your present."

"If it's the crap-assed arrowheads you've been working on, then I'm okay with that."

"Clint," Steve reprimanded lightly and the archer rolled his eyes.

"It's true," he insisted, trying to ignore the blatant look of disapproval he was receiving from Steve. "There's no way those things are going to fly straight. And they're too small to be shot from my bow."

"Because they're darts," Tony interjected smoothly. "For something Natasha asked for. I don't work
on your toys until you've vacated the vents. But if you're too busy," he finished leadingly.

"I suppose I can take a look," Clint acknowledged, pushing himself off of the couch and following the billionaire down to the lab.

The doors opened automatically for Tony and he bypassed his desk, heading towards one of the numerous workbenches that littered the lab floor. Clint watched with carefully disguised interest as Tony passed his hand over one end of a table and the top slid away to reveal a rack of six arrows amidst other detritus. Tony reached down a hand and delicately picked one shaft from the rest.

"These," he said. "Are hollow. They're based somewhat on hollow point bullets."

Clint cocked his head. "They shatter?"

"Sort of, but not really." Tony held the shaft in front of his face. "They do shatter, but I haven't really designed the casing for maximum impact. What they will do, is shatter enough for the air-sensitive explosive inside to emerge."

Clint raised an eyebrow. "You discovered an air-sensitive explosive?"

"Created," Tony corrected nonchalantly. "See, the shafts are made of a low molecular weight polymer with a structure that resembles the planes of schist."

"Of what?"

"Schist," Tony repeated, glancing back up at Clint. When the archer flailed a hand for more explanation, Tony sighed and rolled his eyes. "A geological rock formation. It forms so that the grains are parallel and flake easily. This is the same basic principle."

Clint kept his face carefully blank, trying not to look impressed and stroke Tony's ego any more. The billionaire raised his eyebrow at him.

"Of course, if you're not interested, then I can always repurpose them," Tony said, replacing the arrow shaft in the table's recess.

Clint crossed his arms challengingly. "For what?"

"I'm sure the suit could use them." Tony shrugged.

The two men held a standoff for a few moments before Clint grinned. "Yeah, alright. I'll take them."

"Fabulous." Tony looked back up at Clint to find the archer still staring at him expectantly. "Did you need something else? Because this isn't a Macy's and I'm not great at customer service."

"Could have fooled me," Clint murmured sarcastically, using one finger to rifle through the mess on the workbench. "What is half this shit, anyway?"

"Plans," Tony replied, watching Clint poke around. "Plans and parts and the beginnings of new projects, don't touch that."

Clint's hand froze millimeters away from a large, plastic-capped vial of a clear liquid. He raised an eyebrow at Tony. "What is it?"

"That," Tony began as he picked up the vial and set it aside. "Is the air-sensitive explosive."

"You keep it in a jar on your desk?" Clint asked incredulously.
"I backfilled it with argon," Tony replied nonchalantly. "Calm down."

The archer rolled his eyes. "I feel like I should be surprised, but I'm really not." He paused for a moment, eyeing the vial. "How big is the explosion?"

Tony grinned mischievously. "Want to find out?"

"Hell yes."

Turning, Tony opened a cabinet to reveal another half a dozen vials sitting on the shelf. "Well, let's go then."

He began walking out of the lab, leaving Clint to retrieve the explosives. Carefully fitting them between his fingers, he followed Tony out onto the drive. The billionaire stopped on the gravel and glanced back at the house. He frowned, and took another ten large steps towards the drive.

Clint watched him with amusement. "You good now?"

"It should be fine." Tony gently took the vials from Clint's hands and offered one back to him. "Aim away from my house, please."

Clint shook his head, and turned his back on the mansion regardless. He tossed the small container in his hand, raising a brow at Tony when the billionaire ducked back towards the garage, and lobbed it towards the narrow end of the drive.

The resulting explosion was much more massive than Clint had been planning for, and he dropped to his stomach, curling his palms around his skull. The noise was deafening, punctuated by bits of rock and debris that flew into the air. Coughing lightly in the aftermath, Clint raised his head cautiously and squinted through the clearing dust. After a moment, he rose, stepping towards the blast site.

The vial itself was obliterated, bits of melted plastic left in the six inch crater that remained in the drive. Thick black scorch marks radiated outwards from the depression and Clint let out a low whistle. Tony crunched to his side and, when Clint turned, found the billionaire holding another container up enticingly with a grin on his face.

"Want to go again?"

Clint was about to agree wholeheartedly when the front door to the mansion burst open. The two men glanced back with surprise as Steve thundered down the front steps with his shield on his arm, followed by Natasha and Thor, both battle ready. They stopped abruptly at the bottom of the stairs, staring at Clint and Tony.

Natasha slowly relaxed and Steve huffed loudly. "I take it we're not being attacked."

"Uh, nope," Clint answered, sharing a look with Tony. "No attacks here."

"Then what the hell is that?" The soldier pointed to the still-smoking crater in the middle of the drive.

"An experiment," Tony replied with aplomb. "Clearly, it worked."

"Yes, because an explosion always signals an experiment gone right," Natasha muttered sarcastically. "What really happened?"

"It really was an experiment, Tash," Clint said. "Air-sensitive explosives for my arrows."

"Because you need that," she mumbled to herself, stepping closer to him.
"I do," he insisted, grinning boyishly at her. "Tony saw that."

Steve turned his glare to the smiling billionaire. "Don't you have a suit to be building? Isn't that more constructive than this?"

"I'm working on it," Tony assured him defensively.

"Go work on it some more," the soldier advised. "It'll be quieter than this, and far less stressful."

"This is not what I had in mind," Natasha whispered in Clint's ear as Tony began to vehemently argue the merits of developing weapons for the rest of the team while Thor looked on with exasperated amusement.

He grinned unrepentantly at her. "But it got the job done."

Steve had forcibly marched Tony back to the lab after the fiasco outside, calming down sufficiently to gently instruct him to finish the Mark Forty-Three. Bruce poked his head out of his lab just long enough to ascertain something had happened and that he was better off not knowing, before he put his headphones back in and tuned them out. Steve soon left Tony alone to work and the billionaire dove into his work with purpose.

"No, no, no, no, no! Damn it, Butterfingers, you can't drop the light when I'm working on this. I need that," Tony muttered after a few hours, halting his movements until the robot retrieved the fallen flashlight as Metallica blasted from the speakers. "I'm going to sell you for scrap, I swear."

"Sir, may I suggest that you get some sleep and try again tomorrow? I'm sure the others would not appreciate spending the rest of the night in an emergency room."

"Snark, JARVIS, we talked about that," Tony corrected, making an adjustment to the wiring in one of the boots. "Bruce could probably fix me anyway."

"I am compelled to remind you that Doctor Banner is a doctor of philosophy, not medicine."

"And assuming that I sustain my normal injuries of a pricked finger and the occasional scratch, I think Bruce will be just fine," Tony retorted, manually turning the volume of the music down.

"Even he would not agree with your leaving the garage door open at this time of night, and for this duration. Miss Potts would not."

"Well, neither one of them is awake at the moment, and I need to be." Tony twitched another wire into place and sat back to stretch for a moment. "Therefore, garage open, cold air in."

"It is chilly tonight," echoed a voice down the ramp and Tony froze. His eyes narrowed as a suited man walked into the garage, looking for all the world like he belonged there. The young face smiled openly at him, and Tony rose abruptly, ignoring the myriad of weapons that littered the worktables.

Stalking out to the garage, he growled, "Who the hell are you?"

The suited man opened his mouth to answer when Tony raised up one hand. "Forget it. I don't care. Get out of my house."

The young man frowned at him, clearly affronted. "Mister Stark, I - ,"

"Correct," Tony interrupted, his eyes coldly flashing. "I am Tony Stark, and I just told you to get the hell out of my house. So why are you still here?"
There was a slight pause as the man seemed to weigh his options. Tony maintained his angry glare until, after a pointed look at the Mark Forty-Three gauntlets to his right, the man finally left.

Tony stared at the garage door for a long moment after the stranger had left, contemplating. "JARVIS, what time is it?"

"It is one thirteen in the morning, sir."

"Plenty of time to install added security onto the gate," Tony said, clapping his hands together. "Redirect the security cameras to the gate and drive, and remind me to develop an algorithm to alert me when someone is approaching."

"Of course, sir. I take it this means that you are not going to sleep."

"Not tonight."

"I want to start acclimating to the Hulk."

Clint froze, arm outstretched and reaching for the bathroom door.

"What?"

Natasha shifted, the only sign that she was more nervous than she sounded. "I'm comfortable with Bruce. I'd even say that we were starting to be friends, in a manner of speaking. But Bruce isn't going to be the one out there, fighting with us. So I need to get used to the Hulk."

"No," Clint growled, running a hand wildly through his hair and thinking that this was not how he wanted to spend his night. "Just, no."

Natasha's eyes narrowed. "I'm not asking your permission."

"Oh, I got the message." Clint glared at her. "This is the worst idea you've ever had. That thing is uncontrollable. How the fuck are you going to acclimate to a rage monster?"

"Slowly." Clint snarled angrily at her reply, refraining from taking his frustrations out on the wall.

"This isn't funny," he yelled.

She glowered at him. "I'm not laughing, Clint. I'm being perfectly serious."

"About training, something that requires the utmost of discipline, with an uncontrollable beast."

She stood at the venom in his tone. "I'm not asking for your help."

"Damn it, Tash, I swore," he reminded her, his voice rising from loud to shouting with each word. "I swore to protect you when we got married, and I cannot protect you from that thing!"

"What's going on here?" They both turned in surprise. Steve looked every bit the commanding officer as he stood in the open doorway to Natasha's room, flanked by the remainder of the household. They had been so caught up in their argument that they hadn't even noticed the knocking and then opening of the door. Clint turned his darkest scowl towards the remainder of the Avengers, to no avail. Steve simply frowned at Clint and glanced at Natasha.

"Clint and I are disagreeing about something," she replied. "It's not an issue."
"You woke the house with your disagreement," Steve said dryly, gesturing behind him. "And it sounds like something the team needs to discuss."

"It has nothing to do with the team," Clint informed Steve firmly.

"I beg to differ," Bruce interjected hesitantly, flinching slightly when Clint's furious glare was focused on him. "Since I'm clearly a part of your discussion."

"Natasha," Steve prompted, stepping into the room and allowing the others to filter in.

She sighed. "The incident on the helicarrier shook me. I wasn't prepared for the Hulk, not as well as I should have been. He scares me," she confessed and it took considerable willpower to keep Clint from stepping to her side. "And I need to conquer that fear."

"I agree," Steve said firmly. "Hear me out, Clint." He held up a placating hand at Clint's damning stare. "Natasha is right. We're going to be fighting with Hulk, and if she's the least bit scared of him, she can't trust him and he can't help her, if that's what is called for."

"Assuming he will help her at all," Clint muttered beneath his breath.

Tony leaned lazily against the doorframe, inspecting his nails. "I'm just going to stand here. Here and alive and not very quiet, as an example of how the Hulk can be helpful."

"Fuck it, Tony, now is not the time," Clint seethed.

Steve spoke over the both of them. "We'll be as careful as we can. Bruce will let Hulk out, which seems to be less chaotic, and Thor will be there to protect Natasha, since he's the only one that can match Hulk in terms of strength."

Clint's eyes were flinty, but Natasha piped up before he could begin his tirade. "That sounds like a good plan," she commented. "Are you okay with that, Bruce?"

Bruce rubbed a hand along his jaw. "It seems to be the best option," he hedged. He turned to the resident demi-god, who looked a little rumpled. "Thor, does that sound okay to you?"

"It would be my honor to protect the lady," he affirmed, with a quick glance at Steve.

Clint was suddenly standing in front of him, vibrating with anger. "If you so much as let a hair on her head get hurt, I will find a way to kill you, demi-god or not."

Thor stood solemn in the face of Clint's wrath. "If I allow harm to come the lady," he murmured with all sincerity. "I will hand you the blade to do so."

They stood motionless for what seemed like eternity before Bruce shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "So," he began hesitantly, and Clint turned to him, his face carefully blank. "You're married. That's not that entirely expected."

Natasha burst into laughter and the tension bled from the room. Tony rolled his eyes. "I knew that."

"I lived with them and I didn't know that," Steve announced with some surprise. He turned to Tony incredulously. "How did you know they were married?"

"The better question is, how he managed to keep it a secret," Pepper murmured, rubbing at her eyes and ignoring Tony's glance of betrayal. "He's not great with those."

"I'm wounded," he told her.
"Poor you," Natasha muttered offhandedly.

He narrowed his eyes at her. "I'm sure everyone would be very interested to hear how this all came about and why you refused to tell people."

Pepper looked hopefully at Natasha. "Please?"

Natasha sighed begrudgingly, but motioned them further into Clint's room. The archer shifted to accommodate them, moving closer to the doorway as Pepper began to wheedle information out of Natasha. Clint shot one last look Thor's way as he slipped out, somewhat reassured when the Asgardian nodded gravely in reply.

Clint's absence wasn't noticed for some time, until the group broke apart and slowly returned to their beds. Frowning as his head count came up short, Steve padded down the stairs, looking for the wayward archer. Clint wasn't to be found anywhere inside the mansion and, after a thorough search, Steve ascended the steps to the second level and opened the door at the end of the hall that led to the roof.

"Of course not," he muttered to himself as he shivered slightly in the night air, glancing hopelessly around at the empty patio. He crawled back into the mansion from the roof, letting out a heavy sigh as he did so, and started at the sight of Natasha leaning against the stairwell wall. Closing the small door behind him, he faced her fully. "Did you need something?"

"He's not up there, is he?"

Steve was starting to feel frustrated enough to allow it to show in his tone. "Would I be down here otherwise?"

Natasha frowned at him, but let his sarcasm slide. "Try Phil's room."

"On the helicarrier?" Steve blinked bemusedly at her, somewhat mystified by her proclamation.

"In the mansion," she clarified, pushing off from the wall and slipping back downstairs.

Steve rubbed a hand across his brow, trying to decipher the assassin's statement. Trailing her to the second level of the house, he paused in the middle of the hallway. Looking around him, he slowly counted off each door and arrived at the two guest rooms at the end of the corridor. Opening the door beside Bruce's yielded an unoccupied room, furnished pleasantly. Squaring his shoulders, he crossed the hall and slowly turned the knob to the second guest bedroom, peeking hesitantly into the darkness.

Clint sat beneath the window casement, legs crossed in front of him, and did not look up as the light from the hallway hit him. "I figured you'd find me eventually," he murmured lowly.

"Nat helped a little," Steve admitted. "But she called this Phil's room."

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"Nat helped a little," Steve admitted. "But she called this Phil's room."

Clint raised his head at Steve's cautiously questioning tone and his face seemed to be wryly sad. "Turn the light on."

Closing the door and obliging him, Steve flicked the switch to the 'on' position and, as the room flooded with light, all Steve could see was soft red, silvery white, and deep blue. Where his bedroom was styled with a nineteen forties feel, this one was styled with a distinct patriotic vibe represented in the bedcovers and the window dressings. Steve glanced around at the pictures on the navy walls with a sense of awe, images of Phil with Clint, and then Maria, and then Natasha intermingled with black
and white prints of himself and the Howling Commandos.

"I see what she meant," he murmured, raising a finger to trace the glass covering a photograph of Bucky and himself. "Where did he find all of this?"

"Garage sales and the internet, and a guy out in California named Morita." Steve spun on the spot, staring at Clint. "You know him?"

"Jim Morita was one of my men," Steve answered, his voice oddly thick. "I'm glad that he and Phil found each other."

Clint nodded, picking at the fraying end of his jeans. "I don't know if they ever managed to meet, but I do know that Morita left all of his Captain America collection to Phil when he died."

"Good." Steve was quiet for a few minutes, allowing Clint to compose his thoughts. When the archer remained silent, Steve dropped to the floor beside him, bringing one knee up. "When did you do all of this?"

Clint grinned hollowly. "What did you think we were doing those first few days? We took the pictures with us when we left SHIELD and they were in the storage unit with the rest of our stuff. We just brought them when we drove up here."

Steve nodded and waited, offering a steady presence for Clint. After a few minutes, he continued quietly. "It started when we went to that first bar, after." There was no need to clarify 'after what.' It was simply implicit.

"You went up to buy us beers, and I left a seat between me and Tash. For Phil." He glanced up at Steve, his eyes suspiciously bright. "That's how we always sat, you know. Me and Tash flanking Phil so that he was within arms' reach if either one of us got into trouble."

"I'm sure that never happened," Steve muttered with a small smile.

Clint laughed shortly. "You'd be surprised at her, Cap. She's not a happy drunk."

Steve chuckled, leaning his head back against the wall. "Did you ever help her?"

"Nah," Clint replied. "She'd have kicked my ass too. And it's not like she needs my help, you know?"

Steve simply raised an eyebrow at Clint, allowing Clint's own words to penetrate his line of thinking. The archer sighed, scrubbing at his eyes with the heel of one hand. "Not cool, man."

"Admittedly, it is a little different," Steve began, and Clint barked a laugh.

"Yes, a seven foot tall mindless, rage machine as opposed to a six foot drunkard," he said bitterly. "No big deal."

The soldier paused for a moment, absently chewing his lip as he debated what to say. "I don't think he's mindless," he finally informed Clint.

Clint slowly turned his head, looking strangely at Steve. "How do you figure that?"

"Think about it," Steve entreated, shifting to face Clint more fully. "When Bruce let him out on purpose, when that huge alien was chasing Tony, he killed the alien and then waited. He listened to me when I gave him an order."
"You told him to do something that he was going to do anyway," Clint protested. "That doesn't fucking count."

"He saved Tony."

Clint rolled his eyes at Steve's stubborn expression. "He caught Tony."

"Which he didn't have to do," Steve insisted staunchly. "But I'll bet you a thousand dollars that Bruce was somewhere, in the back of his brain, begging him to help."

Clint stared at him, mouth agape. "What?"

"Bruce told me, after, that Hulk was always there. That the anger was always there." Steve grinned wryly at Clint. "And I thought that I'd always be angry too, if someone kept me in a cage."

"But they're the same person," Clint said. "Like a schizophrenic."

"I was going to say that it's more Jekyll and Hyde," Steve returned thoughtfully. "But I think that they can communicate with each other."

Clint snorted. "How?"

Steve shrugged. "I think that Hulk is aware of what's going on. Bruce is. He knew what had happened during, because he asked me how my stomach was."

"He wasn't there for that." Clint frowned slowly, thinking back to the aftermath of the battle and trying to remember the timeline they'd worked out.

Steve shook his head, agreeing. "No. But Hulk was there when Nat asked me about it, when we headed upstairs to the Tower penthouse."

Clint was stymied. "You're making a remarkable amount of sense," he admitted.

"I find that it's the best way to annoy Tony," Steve murmured with a smile. He sighed softly, leaning back against the wall. "I understand that it's terrifying. I really do. But this is something that we're going to have to face, one way or another. Would you rather face it now, when we can prepare, or in the middle of our next battle, when it could cost us lives?"

"I'm going to start calling you Yoda or Qui Gon or something," Clint mumbled to himself, raising his voice as he continued, "I'm not okay with this."

"I'm not asking you to be happy about it," Steve assured him. "But it's going to happen, with or without your permission. I'm saying that it might be better for your marriage if you pretended like everything was fine."

"And what if, when this is over," Clint asked softly, staring straight ahead. "I don't have a marriage anymore?"

The implication of Natasha's death hung heavy in the air and Steve took his time in replying. "I don't want to tell you that we can protect her completely. That she won't get hurt if we try this, because I don't want to lie to you. I don't know what will happen and I can't predict the future."

Steve shifted slightly. "But what I can tell you is that there's a group of men out there that would rather die than let something happen to her."

"Tony wouldn't." Clint corrected. "We both know that."
"I think that, when push comes to shove, Tony would surprise you," Steve rejoined gently. "And ultimately, this is all up to Nat and Bruce. Not you or me."

Steve gave Clint a reassuring pat on the shoulder and rose, flipping off the lights as he left Clint with his thoughts.

Clint's, and to a lesser extent, Natasha's, bad habit of spontaneously arriving in the lab had prompted Tony to install an increasingly sophisticated prevention system that ranged from a basic padlock at the beginning to a computerized lock and pressure-based early warning system. He'd been smugly satisfied with himself until Steve had pointed out that Bruce's vents were still vulnerable. The scientist had graciously declined a similar precaution, but agreed to a silent version of the early warning system and promptly forgotten about it.

The small red light blinked insistently at the top of his StarkPad and it took Bruce several moments to realize what it meant. Glancing up, he found Clint perched on the arm of his sofa and bit back on a jolt of surprise.

"Hello there," he greeted, adjusting his glasses somewhat nervously.

"Hey." Clint leaned forward minutely, his gray eyes unwavering. "Hey to you too, Hulk."

Bruce blinked rapidly, his brain trying to process what was going on. "What?"

Clint cocked his head to the slightly side, giving every appearance of an actual hawk, and raised an eyebrow at Bruce. "I said hi to you. And then I said hi to Hulk. He can hear me, right?"

"Have you been talking to Steve?" Bruce asked dubiously.

"I talk to Steve often," Clint relied casually, neither confirming nor denying Bruce's questioning observation. "He generally makes a point of it every day. Bad habit of his."

"It's what makes him Steve, right?" Bruce asked with a slightly nervous chuckle.

"Many things make him Steve," Clint agreed sagely. "You didn't answer my question."

Bruce froze for a moment and then sighed, removing his glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose. Clint, oddly, still unnerved him. He reminded Bruce of a harsher version of Tony, just as intelligent, but in different ways, and infinitely more difficult to read. They hadn't spent much time together and the only thing that Bruce knew for certain about the archer was that he was a crack shot and that he absolutely did not want Natasha anywhere near Hulk.

"I know what you want me to tell you," he murmured. "But I can't. I can't control him."

"For the record, Doc." Bruce glanced up, slipping his glasses back on, and blinked bemusedly at Clint's small grin. "You're not a mind reader. And you're not a psychiatrist. So, how about we start over and you answer the question I asked so that you find out what I'm actually thinking."

Bruce was speechless for a few long moments, staring at the archer while he waited patiently for Bruce to compose himself. "I, uh," Bruce stammered. "Well, yeah. He can."

Clint leaned back. "He's aware of what's going on?"

"Yes," Bruce admitted. "At first, I thought that it was my emotions that triggered him. So I studied meditation. And then I thought it was my heart rate. So I concentrated on keeping that down. And
then I heard him."

Clint froze momentarily. "You heard him."

"A growl in the back of my brain," Bruce confirmed. "There's a tingle, right where my skull meets my spinal cord, when he's talking to me. And whatever he's saying, it's clear as day. I can feel his emotions, when he's starting to get really angry, and I know what he's thinking. When he wants me to."

"So, what happened? In New York?"

Bruce laughed hollowly. "How much time have you got? I haven't even tried to figure that out."

In response, Clint shifted his body weight, dropping lightly from the couch's arm to the cushions, and gave Bruce a pointed look. The scientist chuckled to himself and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms.

He sat for a moment, looking thoughtful. "He was there. He was vocal, from the moment I saw Natasha in India until I let him out in Midtown. Always there, niggling, shooting out little bits of his opinions. And when Steve said I should get angry, all he could say was, 'YES'. So I let him out."

He finally glanced back up at Clint and found the archer listening intently, the concentration on his face belied by his casual pose. "When the change happens, I lose consciousness. It's like taking two doses of Benadryl together – everything is fine, and then it goes black. I was like that for most of it. He usually blocks me from seeing anything. I'm not as good at blocking him, though."

"Maybe he's protecting you," Clint offered, grinning at Bruce's sudden stare. "I'm just playing Steve right now. That sounds like a Steve thing, right?"

"It does," Bruce conceded with a nod. He was quiet for another few moments. "And that theory might hold a little weight. I finally broke through, though. I think he was tired. He'd been attacked by a whole group, I think, based on the bodies that were around us."

"What's it like?" Bruce shook himself from his reverie at Clint's soft question. He glanced at the archer who waved a hand absentely. "When he's leading?"

"It's different," Bruce murmured after a pause. "I can see things, but it's like watching through a video camera. I can only see what he's seeing, but I can't do anything about it. I can react to what I see, but he doesn't."

"And then he looked up and we saw Tony falling, falling and not flying, and I begged him. I begged him to help. And when Tony wouldn't wake up, I remember screaming at Steve to do something, to try and save a mind that brilliant, and then he roared, whether to shut me up or to tell Steve, I don't know. But Tony woke up. And he said, 'There'." Bruce raised his gaze to Clint again. "And then I blacked out again."

Clint was silent for a few minutes before he gave the scientist a small smile. "And you think he doesn't listen to you."

"I think there's no guarantee that he'll listen to me," Bruce corrected.

"So you think that this is a bad idea."

Bruce sighed, tossing his glasses onto the table and dropping his face into his hands. He pressed the tips of his fingers into his eye sockets, using the pressure to ground himself. "I don't know what to
"think," he admitted. "On one hand, I understand her argument, and on the other hand, the thought of letting him out, on purpose, in a non-battle setting, terrifies the shit out of me."

Clint reclined in his seat, crossing his feet at the ankles and lacing his fingers together on his stomach. He remained silent for long enough that Bruce started to grow nervous, thinking that he may have let too much slip. "I think you should do it."

Bruce blinked at Clint. "That is not what you were saying a little while ago."

Clint shrugged. "I had a talk with Steve. And I got to thinking. And Tasha really, really wants this."

"Can't say no to her?" Bruce quirked his lips.

Clint snorted. "You try saying no to that woman. She'll kick your ass."

"Precisely." The two men stared suddenly at the doorway, where Natasha was standing with an arch look on her face. Walking over, she plopped herself in Clint's lap. "Does this mean I can do it?"

"Did you really need my permission?" he asked with visible chagrin.

She grinned at Bruce. "No. But you tend to pitch fits when you don't get your way, so I thought I'd make sure you were agreeing to it."

Bruce hid a smile behind his hand at the pair. Clint sighed, hitching Natasha more securely into his lap. "Alright, Babushka. Let's do this."

To be continued in Chapter Nine.
Chapter Nine

"You must remember, family is often born of blood, but it doesn't depend on blood. Nor is it exclusive of friendship. Family members can be your best friends, you know. And best friends, whether or not they are related to you, can be your family."

— Trenton Lee Stewart, The Mysterious Benedict Society

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"The most important thing in life is your family. There are days you love them, and others you don't, but in the end they're the people you always come home to. Sometimes it's the family you're born into, and sometimes it's the one you make for yourself."

— Candice Bergen, Sex and the City

Chapter Nine

Bruce walked purposefully into the kitchen the next morning and sat in the seat beside Natasha, rather than his usual place.

"We need to talk about logistics," he announced, consciously ignoring her muted surprise and Steve's quiet amusement, placing his tablet on the table. "There has to be a plan."

"A plan for what?" Thor asked as he stumbled down the stairs, hair ruffled.

Bruce turned to him. "For this acclimation period."

Shaking himself awake, Thor accepted the cup of coffee that Steve held out to him. "I agree, Banner. How do you feel we should proceed?"

"Carefully," Natasha murmured, curling in her chair. "And with a cage."

"Nat," Steve interjected softly.

"No," Bruce shook his head as Thor sat across from him, setting his coffee down. "I understand that it would make you feel better, but he will go berserk."

Natasha sat on her hands to hide their betraying tremor and Thor crossed his arms, shooting her a glance. "Then what may we do in order to appease both parties involved? You are the one with the most knowledge."

Bruce let out his breath in a whoosh, stopping for a few long minutes to think. "I think that the only thing you can do is to be in uniform and battle ready. That's how he saw you the last time. It should be okay with him. I'll try and tell him that." He glanced up apologetically at Thor. "He probably still won't like you, though."

The Asgardian grinned. "Fear not, Banner. I am well able to withstand his disregard."

"I should think so," Steve murmured with a small smile. "It sounds like a good plan to me."

"Where shall I and the others be?" Thor asked, sipping at his drink.
Bruce visibly deferred to Steve, recognizing that the soldier was better equipped to answer the question than he was. Steve paused, contemplating. "We can have Tony on the perimeter, ready to fly in and get Nat out of there if necessary. Thor, you should stand to the side on the off chance that Hulk wants to attack you. Clint will be behind Nat and I'll be in front, talking to him."

"I'm still astounded that you think he's going to talk to you," Bruce muttered, rising to pour himself a cup.

"You're snippy when you're stressed," Tony commented lightly as he tumbled down the stairs. "I think you've been hanging around me too much."

"Unfathomable," Pepper said serenely as she followed behind him. "Good morning, everyone. I hear you have big plans for this week."

"Yes." Bruce eyed her for a minute, coffeepot in hand. "You should stay in the city."

She blinked at him as he poured himself a cup and retook his seat. Tony raised his brows at Steve, shooting a glance Pepper's way when she choked out, "Excuse me?"

"You should stay in the city this week, at least," Bruce repeated, seemingly unaware of the astonished irritation on Pepper's face while he unlocked his tablet and fiddled with the browser. "We don't know how he'll react, and it may be better if you're not around. Just in case something goes wrong."

"This is about to be very entertaining," Tony muttered, taking of sip of the coffee that Steve placed in front of him.

Pepper placed both her palms on the table and leaned towards Bruce, who remained oblivious.

"Bruce," she began in a forcibly calm tone. "Do you think I'm a damsel?"

"No." He shook his head, finally raising his gaze from his screen and flinching at the look in her eyes. "No," he repeated slowly. "You are definitely not a damsel."

"Then I am definitely not a damsel in distress," she informed him, ignoring Tony's snort of amusement. "And I will not be sitting in the city, twiddling my thumbs like a good housewife, until you deem it safe for me to come home. Understand?"

"Absolutely," he agreed immediately. "You are not a damsel."

When he said nothing else, she raised her brows and said leadingly, "And I will not be sitting at home."

Bruce was quiet for a long moment. "That remains to be seen," he finally murmured, averting his gaze.

Pepper's eyes narrowed and she inhaled sharply when Tony, one coffee into the day, rose and took a calm hold on her arm.

"Come with me," he whispered in her ear, shooting a glance Bruce's way. The scientist shrugged, unapologetic, and Tony nodded to himself. Directing his attention to Steve, he tipped his head towards the stove. "Save me some breakfast, Spangles. I'm starving."

"Will do," the soldier replied, heading towards the refrigerator as Tony gently pulled Pepper from the room.
She was practically vibrating with ire as she stalked past him up the stairs and to their shared bedroom. She allowed him in and then slowly pressed the door shut before she turned and figuratively exploded.

"Who the hell does he think he is? My father?" she burst out, beginning to pace. "Honestly, that's the most chauvinistic, antiquated, back-water way of thinking I've ever heard."

When Tony remained oddly silent, she whirled on him. "Don't you agree with me?"

"No." She stared at him, stunned, and he sighed softly. "Is his request unfair? Yes. Is it sexist? Also yes. But is it valid? A loud and resounding yes."

"How can you say that?" she bit out, betrayal seeping into her voice.

"I can say that because you are you, again. There is no more Extremis." She scoffed and turned away, wiping surreptitiously at her eyes. "And I'm glad for it."

"I thought you were a fan of that look," she muttered.

"Sports bra and yoga pants? Absolutely. Your whole body glowing with tech that I didn't create? Not so much." She continued to glare at him with disdain, so he stepped closer to her, curling his palms around her elbows and looking seriously into her eyes.

"I know," she interrupted, shaking his hands off and crossing her arms. "I'm not a superhero. I'm the girlfriend, so I stay far away."

"You stay away because Bruce cares about you," he corrected, pulling her into an embrace, despite her protests. "And because I care about you."

"Cheater," she mumbled into his shirt.

He grinned. "We don't know how this will play out. It might be fine. It might be a disaster. And if it makes Bruce feels better to know that you aren't in the mansion if Hulk goes crazy, then that will be one less thing for him to worry about."

"And you?" She leaned out of his arms and tilted her head to the side. "Will it make you feel better?"

"Now that I don't have a spare suit to put you in? Yes," he affirmed. "It would."

Her expression shifted slightly, melting from a challenge into defeat, and she nodded. "Okay."

"It's not that I think you're weak or that I don't trust Hulk," he told her. "But no one knows how this is going to go down, and I'm not ready to take chances with you."

"Still cheating," she chastised lightly. "But it's sweet."

"I can be sweet," he replied swiftly. "I'm excellent at sweet."

She snorted. "Like my Christmas present?"

"Blowing up all of my suits for you was practically saccharine," he declared.

"I was thinking more about the gigantic stuffed rabbit," she hedged, poking one finger into his shoulder for emphasis.

He rolled his eyes, fingering the zipper on her dress. "The rabbit was very thoughtful, I thought.
Charming, even."

"It was something," she agreed, glancing down at his hand as he began tugging the zipper down. "What are you doing?"

"I am doing something that you like," he informed her. "Since it is clear that the rabbit was not it. You do still like this, right?"

"I do still like this," she murmured with a smile. "And maybe I could do that thing you like."

"Which thing? That thing, or that thing?"

She laughed lightly, pressing a kiss to his jawline. "Both."

He hummed in response, turning his face to catch her lips. Her hands dipped towards his belt and he had her zipper halfway down when someone pounded up the stairs and into their room.

Pepper pulled away immediately, sheltering herself behind Tony's black glare. Clint ground to a halt just inside the door, taking in the scene with vague amusement. "Whoops."

"Your bedroom is over there, Barton," Tony informed him with a gesture. "Just in case you've spent so much time in Red's room that you've forgotten."

"Tetchy," Clint observed, leaning against the doorframe. "Feeling a little tightly wound?"

"He probably is now," Pepper muttered to herself, zipping up the side of her dress. Tony shot her a look and she smiled widely at him. "Looks like this is my cue, gentlemen. Time for work."

"Of course it is," Tony grumbled petulantly.

She laughed as she kissed him goodbye and slipped out of the door. "To be continued. See you tonight, Clint."

"Is that an invitation?" he called lecherously after her.

She turned back at the stairs, raising a brow at him. "No."

"Please tell me you barged in on us for a reason," Tony said, still glaring at Clint. "A very, very good, on par with the apocalypse type reason."

"Maybe not apocalyptic," Clint allowed. "But it is fairly decent. It seems that this whole thing is going down tomorrow."

Tony let out a low whistle despite his irritation. "That's fast."

"Bruce said it's like ripping off a bandaid." Clint made a jerking motion with his hand. "The anticipation will be fucking awful if he and Tash wait too long."

Tony glared at him. "That could have waited."

"There's breakfast ready?" Tony continued to glower at the archer. "Your suit isn't finished."

"Damn it." Tony huffed, running a hand through his hair. "Fine."

They scattered after breakfast, each Avenger retreating to a comfortable space. Tony holed himself in
the lab, putting the finishing touches on the Mark Forty-Three suit, with Steve ensconced on the
couch by his desk. Clint took his Glock to the range, and Thor disappeared upstairs to the bedrooms.
Bruce slipped out the door to sit in the Zen garden, and Natasha, after a few hours of aimless
wandering, retreated to the rooftop.

The large patio was completely unexpected, set deep into the back slope of the roof as if it belonged
there. Potted plants lined the outer walls, a decorative railing set into the roof to prevent any
accidental falls. Small steps descended from a short door that led to a corridor inside the mansion,
which curved around the attic space and opened at the end of the bedroom hallway.

The rooftop patio was empty when Natasha slipped out of the short door and into the weak afternoon
sun. She shivered lightly, hugging Bruce's pilfered sweater closer to her torso. The air inside the
mansion had grown thick with the anticipation for the next day. Now that a time had been set, she
found herself overcome with anxiety and headed outside for solace.

Walking to the edge of the porch, she leaned over the railing and nearly started in her surprise. Thor
sat on the rooftop beside Steve's window, staring out into the woods, but turned at the sound of her
approach. Peeking down again, she nodded at Thor's wave. Standing, he wavered slightly on the
shingles and caught his balance before he walked up the roof to where she was. She stepped back to
allow him the space to lift one long leg over the railing and join her.

"Good afternoon, Lady Natasha," he greeted softly.

She offered a small smile. "It's just Natasha, Thor. Or Nat, if you prefer."

"Such as Steve calls you," he acknowledged.

When he said nothing else, an uncomfortable silence fell and Natasha realized that they hadn't spent
all that much time together. Nor had she thanked him for distracting Hulk on the helicarrier and
saving her life. And here he was, willing to repeat his actions while she acclimated to Hulk. She
shifted from one foot to the other.

"Thank you," burst out of her mouth before she quite knew what she was saying. When he simply
eyed her with curiosity, she continued clumsily. "For offering to do this. Tomorrow."

"It is no trouble," he assured her, turning to stare out at the forest. "I am glad to be of service and aid
you in overcoming your fear.

She fidgeted, wrapping her fingers around the iron spikes on the railing. "It shouldn't take long," she
said bravely. "I'm not worried. It's just his size, really. Once I get used to that, I'll be fine."

"That is not it," he returned matter-of-factly. "You fear him not because he is large and brawny, else
you would also fear me. You fear him because he cannot be reasoned with. He is the one creature on
whom your wiles will not be of assistance."

She stared at him, open mouthed, and he smiled softly.

"Do not feel unsettled," he said, trying to calm her. "I have found that, on Midgard, if I am quiet long
enough and I observe, people forget that I am not unintelligent."

He speared her with a look and Natasha felt slightly guilty. Choosing to spare her any more
awkwardness, he focused on the view. Her thoughts laid bare, Natasha saw no point in continuing to
hide. Relaxing, she leaned forward over the rail.

"You're not wrong," she finally said. At his pointed look, she grinned. "About why he scares me."
"I am not wrong about many things," Thor offered, shooting her a smile to counteract his peevish tone. Pausing thoughtfully, he continued with a wistful note, "But I am about some."

"We all know that what happened with Loki wasn't your fault."

"Directly, no," Thor admitted. "However, I am afraid that I may have indirectly caused my brother's downfall."

She shook her head, facing him. "What Loki did, he did because of himself. Not because of anything that you did or didn't do."

"Doctor Banner told me something similar once," he murmured after a few long moments. "After the battle was won."

"Then it must be true."

He smiled softly. "If it were that simple. Then sleep would come easily and you would have no concerns."

"I have no concerns," she retorted immediately, the reply a reflex. Thor glanced at her dubiously and she winced.

"You should not fear tomorrow," he finally said. "Banner is communing with Hulk now, attempting to create a smooth transition. The others are there to assist him and to protect you."

Looking seriously at her, he continued, "And I will not hesitate to step in between you and danger."

She smiled gently at him. "Thank you, Thor."

"Thanks are not necessary," he assured her. "We are a team now. And this is a part of belonging to a team."

"Throwing ourselves in the path of mortal danger?" she joked lightly.

He shook his head, his expression solemn. "Trust. That is the first hurdle. And tomorrow is how we overcome it."

More stunned than she cared to admit, Natasha forced her eyes out over the forest. Long minutes passed in silence until she chuckled softly.

"You're right, Thor," she murmured when he turned a curious gaze on her. "You are not unintelligent."

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The following morning dawned bright and cold, the morning sun sparkling through the icicles that dangled from the tree limbs. Their breath hung heavy in the air as the Avengers traipsed out to the depths of the forest.

Thor had gone out and scouted a suitable place in the early dawn hours. At Bruce's consent, the demi-god led them through the forest to a small glade at the base of the mountains. Bruce stepped towards the middle, turning in a circle as the others milled around somewhat aimlessly, waiting for instructions.

"This should work," Bruce finally said, looking around. "Thanks, Thor."

"It was no trouble," Thor replied. "I am glad that you find it amenable."
Bruce smiled nervously, absently wringing his hands together. He glanced at Steve. "Shall we?"

"Alright," Steve nodded. "Bruce, I think that you should stand in the middle of the clearing. That way Hulk can see that there's no one around him but us. Thor, you stay to our left, just a little bit out of the way. Tony, to the right. I want you ready to get Nat out of here if there's an issue."

Tony slammed the faceplate into place. "Roger that, Rogers."

Steve faced Clint and Natasha, his brow furrowed in thought. "Clint, I think that you and I should flank Nat."

"You got it, Cap," Clint muttered. A few tense minutes passed as the group shifted into their positions and Bruce pulled his jacket off, tossing it to the side.

"Okay," Steve finally said, giving Bruce a nod. "Whenever you're ready."

Bruce inhaled deeply and let it out slowly. There was a long moment where everything in the clearing was still, and then his skin tinged green.

Natasha watched in carefully concealed, abject horror as Bruce's body shifted and changed, his limbs lengthening and bulging. His sweat pants strained to contain the expanding muscles, ripping at the calves. The simple white shirt he wore tore completely from his torso, and his brown eyes finally turned emerald.

Hulk huffed loudly, his fists clenching absently at his sides. Natasha was frozen in place and, with a glance in her direction, Steve stepped forward.

"Hi Hulk," he greeted, standing tall when the jade gaze was turned on him. "Do you remember me?"

Hulk grunted, looking off into the distance, which Steve seemed to take as a yes. Advancing further, his shield at his side, he spoke again. "We just wanted you to get used to us. We're all a team, and you are a part of that."

Hulk kept his attention on the mountains, not acknowledging Steve's words in any way. He let his breath out in a whoosh for a moment and glanced around himself at the others. When his gaze found Natasha, she took one involuntary step back, and his eyes narrowed.

She took another step away and Clint was there at her back. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Leaving," she replied as Hulk turned his whole body to face them, seemingly ignoring Steve's calming commentary at his feet. "This was a mistake."

"This was your fucking idea," Clint exclaimed. "You wanted him out here, and here he is. You can't leave now."

"Why the hell not?" she quipped tensely, never breaking eye contact with Hulk. "It doesn't look like he's a fan."

"You don't know that," Clint chastised. "Have you asked?"

Natasha finally turned to stare at Clint. "Have I what?"

"Have you asked him how he's doing?" Clint repeated, as if it were the most logical thing in the world. "It's the first time he's been out since Midtown. It's a nice day outside."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" she hissed, giving her full attention to Clint and twisting to face him.
"Who the hell cares that it's nice outside?"

Shooting her a look that, for the first time since she'd been partnered with him, she couldn't decipher, Clint turned and did not flinch to find Hulk's face less than six feet from him.

"Hi Hulk," he greeted, apparently ignoring Natasha's blatant fear at Hulk's proximity. "How you doing, pal? Doing alright?"

Clint held one hand out, his index finger and thumb making a circle as his other three fingers stood straight in the universal sign for 'okay'. There was a small pause, just long enough for Natasha to feel that she was going to start hyperventilating, and then Hulk moved. Raising his right arm, he mimicked Clint's gesture perfectly. The archer grinned.

"That's great pal. That's great." Natasha made a strangled noise in the back of her throat and the archer flicked his gaze towards her for a moment. "Why don't we do some introductions? There wasn't really time for that last time you were out."

Hulk let out a staccato grunt and leaned back on his haunches, plopping to the ground with a thud that rattled the trees. Steve moved to join Clint, catching Hulk's attention and smiling openly at him. Clint nodded at Steve, and the soldier took over.

"I'm, well, I'm Captain America," Steve announced. "This is Clint, you know, but we call him Hawkeye. This is the Black Widow." He gestured to Natasha. "You can call her Nat."

"Girl," Hulk acknowledged with a nod. "Girl scared."

Natasha nodded, the motion slightly hysterical. "Yeah. Girl scared."

"Stop," Hulk told her with a glare, and poked one finger into Steve's chest hard enough to cause the soldier to stumble. "Star." Turning to Clint and ignoring Natasha's look of stunned disbelief, he nudged the archer's torso as well, more gently. "Pal."

Tony landed off to their left with a soft noise and Hulk turned his attention to the billionaire. "Stark," he rumbled, the lines around his eyes softening.

Tony flipped the faceplate up and grinned. "Hey there, Big Guy. Thanks again for the catch."

"Welcome," Hulk returned, and shifted to growl at the approaching Thor.

The Asgardian simply gave the verdant leviathan a regal nod. "It is pleasing to meet you again, my friend. You were a worthy opponent and a great ally."

Hulk chuffed lightly and turned his back to Thor. Glancing down at Steve, he growled, "Banner."

Steve cocked his head curiously. "Bruce is with you," he said slowly, confused.

Hulk snarled softly, giving Steve a look that clearly indicated the soldier was being an idiot, and reiterated, "Banner."

"Okay," Tony muttered. "What?"

Hulk closed his eyes and, to the surprise of all, began to shrink. His flesh lightened to pale peach, the bones crackling back to a more normal size and the muscles contracting to fit the reformed skeleton. After a long minute, Bruce sat on the ground, his pants lying loosely around his hips. The scientist blinked at their stunned faces for a moment, uncomprehendingly, and he took the time to raise one
shaky hand to count them.

When he reached five, he exhaled noisily. "Thank God," he muttered hoarsely, and promptly passed out.

Bruce woke slowly, pressing a hand to his head and groaning. The back of his brain was conspicuously quiet, almost as if Hulk was attempting to keep a low profile. Shifting his shoulders, he vaguely registered the feeling of the thick brocade and squishy pillows that characterized his lab sofa before his mental assessment was interrupted.

"Here." A glass of water appeared in his vision, held delicately between lithe fingers. Peeking through his lashes, he squinted at Natasha's upturned lips. "I thought this might be helpful."

"Thanks," he croaked, rising just enough to take the glass and sip from it without spilling. He glanced around blearily, noting that they were not alone. She followed his gaze and read the question in his eyes.

"Thor carried you back after you blacked out," she told him.

"Bridal style," Tony added helpfully from his position, perched atop Bruce's desk. "I wanted to take pictures, but Spangles wouldn't let me."

"You're welcome," Steve said, tossing a bottle of ibuprofen to Natasha as he walked in. She caught it effortlessly and palmed two pills, holding them out to Bruce. "We were going to put you in your bedroom, but I didn't think you'd want the whole lot of us in there when you woke up, so we settled on the lab."

"Still thanks," Bruce managed, lurching upwards from his half-prone position. He sighed heavily and eased his feet to the floor. "I didn't do anything embarrassing, did I?"

"Define embarrassing," Tony mused, his eyes laughing.

Steve shot him a light glare as Bruce took the pills from Natasha's hand and popped them into his mouth, chasing them with a swig of water. "You were dead to the world," the soldier assured him. "Nothing embarrassing happened."

"You snore, though." Bruce turned at Clint's quiet proclamation, somewhat surprised to find the archer reclining on the floor immediately to his right, half hidden by the arm of the couch. Glancing down, he blinked at Clint's lazy grin. "Like a freight train."

"You seem calm," he blurted out, shifting to face Clint better. "I take that means everything is fine."

Clint's grin widened and he chuckled. "You could say that, Doc."

"It seems that our archer has made a friend of Hulk," Thor offered. Bruce stared at him, agape, and Thor fidgeted slightly, uncertain. "So it appeared to me."

"He calls me pal," Clint explained, looking faintly gleeful at Bruce's thunderstruck expression. "He didn't even flick me, like he did Steve."

Bruce whirled on Steve, his eyes questioning, and the soldier shrugged. "He was pointing out that he recognized everyone and he got a little enthusiastic. It didn't hurt."

Nodding, Bruce averted his gaze and found Clint staring at him with a curious air. "Why did you
bother to count us?"

Bruce rubbed a hand across his brow. "I could feel him searching through my memories, and his own, but he wouldn't let me see what was going on. I had no idea what was happening, then everything went black again, and he let me out. It was the first thing I could think of to do."

Thor launched into a staunch defense of Hulk and how Bruce's worries were unnecessary, and Steve leaned closer to catch the billionaire's attention without alerting the rest of the room. "What is that light?"

Tony blinked at the soldier, turning away from Thor's monologue. "What light?"

"The light that's flashing in your lab," Steve explained, pointing towards the soft flickering that was emanating from the break room.

Tony stared at the doorway for a moment, frowning, and stepped into his lab. Steve hesitated and made a move to join Tony when the billionaire returned, his face grim. "It's nothing. Don't worry about it."

Steve raised an eyebrow at him and faced him more fully. "Tony."

"Everything is fine, Spangles," Tony replied with a hint of frustration. "I had JARVIS run tests on some new security measures. They work."

"That's it?" the soldier asked, slightly incredulous. "Just a new test?"

"Scouts' honor," Tony offered swiftly.

"If you're sure," Steve murmured, his expression dubious.

"Hey, are you two done yet?" Clint called, interrupting the quiet conversation. "It's lunchtime."

"Do you ever think about anything other than food?" Natasha asked.

He grinned lecherously at her. "Sometimes."

"A true warrior needs copious amounts of good sustenance," Thor offered, watching warily as Natasha narrowed her eyes at Clint. "My compatriot Volstagg would not disagree with Barton. Nor will I."

Clint gestured triumphantly at Thor. "See? Food."

"I married a five year old," Natasha muttered to herself.

"Sir, I am compelled to warn you that your five days are nearly up. You must return to the main floor within five hours, or you will be forcibly removed from your lab."

Tony finished soldering a delicate piece of wiring into place in Natasha's glove and pulled the goggles from his face. Running a hand down his face, he groaned and missed the security feed from the gate cameras turn to static. "What day is it?"

"Wednesday, sir."

"Fantastic," he muttered, taking a few minutes to check that the wires were immobile before he turned the soldering iron off and set the glove aside, heading upstairs.
Stepping into the lounge, Tony detoured from his path to the bedrooms at the sound of the front doorbell ringing. He stared at the door in irritated surprise for a long moment. Stepping forward, he flung it open and narrowed his eyes at the person on the other side. It vaguely registered that the man on his doorstep was suited in much the same manner as the last two visitors and Tony frowned.

"Did you need something?" He could hear someone walk up behind him, but he kept his focus on the flustered man at the door.

Steve stepped up beside him, his brow furrowed. "Hello, Agent Marshall. Is there something we can help you with?"

Agent Marshall fidgeted nervously, glancing at Tony. "I'm reporting for duty, Captain Rogers."

Steve looked confused. "Duty?"

Agent Marshall began to explain, but Tony's brain had already put two and two together. His expression degenerated into a scowl so terrifying that the agent stepped back in visible fear.

"No," Tony said flatly. "You leave now."


"Okay," Tony interrupted, his voice low. "You leave voluntarily, or I make you leave."

The agent looked unsure. "Captain Rogers wouldn't allow that."

"I wouldn't bank on that, kid," Tony replied as Steve moved to present a more solid front. "It's time for you to go."

Agent Marshall developed a very slight case of having a spine, raising his brow sarcastically at Tony. "And if I don't?"

Tony smirked in return. "You will," he replied, the muscles in his arm tensing as he slammed the door shut and bolted it. He turned to Steve, who held his hands up.

"This was not my idea."

"What wasn't your idea?" They turned to see Clint and Natasha in the doorway, staring curiously at the pair.

Tony settled a glare on Steve, who sighed. "Team meeting."

Clint took a large bite from the apple in his hand and chewed slowly, contemplating the soldier. "Will there be pie?"

Steve rolled his eyes. "Yes, Clint. There will be pie."

"I'm in," the archer replied immediately. "I'll go get Banner."

Tony, obviously on edge, stalked wordlessly into the kitchen. Natasha shot Steve a questioning glance that he waved off, instead walking upstairs to retrieve Thor.

It didn't take long for the team to get settled at the table with wedges of blackberry pie and large glasses of cold milk. Clint sighed happily as he dug into his piece and glanced up at Steve.

"So what's the meeting about?"
Steve leaned back against the counter. "I had a talk with Director Fury a little while ago, when Agent Hill called me in."

"You mean Maria," Clint corrected through a mouthful of pie. He nudged Tony's arm. "He means Maria."

Tony maintained a silent glower, ignoring Clint, who raised his brows in curiosity. Steve glossed over Clint's comment and finished explaining.

"He informed me that we needed a handler, a liaison between us and SHIELD." He bit back a sigh as Clint suddenly tensed. "I meant to discuss it before now, but I got sidetracked and then it slipped my mind. In the meantime, SHIELD has, apparently, been sending out candidates without consulting me," Steve continued, his furrowed brow indicating his displeasure at being crossed.

"Are we to interview these candidates?" Thor asked, draining his glass.

"No," Tony replied, and Natasha shifted in her chair. "We're not getting a handler."

Steve frowned. "What? Why not?"

"Because I said so." Tony's childish answer grated on Steve's nerves and he fought against a truly sarcastic retort.

"You're not five, Tony," he pointed out as gently as he could. "That isn't going to work. I need to give Director Fury a reason more legitimate than, 'because Tony doesn't want one'."

Tony stiffened in his chair, his eyes cold, and Steve recognized that the conversation was rapidly degenerating. "I don't give a shit what works, Rogers," the billionaire murmured as he pushed back from the table, his voice fraught with quiet anger. "I will not have a mindless dumbfuck in my house. End of story."

At that, he strode back downstairs to the lab. Steve sighed softly, rubbing a tired hand over his eyes. Bruce rinsed his dish and set it in the sink.

"You'll figure this out, Steve," he assured him, laying a hand on the younger man's shoulder.

Steve nodded, and Bruce wandered down to his lab, motioning to Thor to follow. Steve glanced back up at the pair of assassins still sitting at the table. Natasha was watching him, not unkindly, and Clint had finished his pie and was sliding Tony's plate over to his place.

"Any advice?" Steve asked hopefully. Clint was stubbornly silent, choosing instead to busy himself with pouring another glass of milk. Natasha watched him with a concerned eye for a moment, before turning back to the soldier.

"Pepper."

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Steve walked hesitantly into Stark Tower, approaching the receptionist at the front desk. She was speaking rapidly into a phone receiver, and seemed to be extremely busy. Steve waited.

She finally glanced up and noticed him, blinking somewhat confusedly. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, ma'am," Steve said politely, smiling. "I'd like to speak with Miss Potts, please."

The young lady's face closed down and Steve bit back a wince. "Miss Potts is unavailable to meet with anyone at this time, but I can make an appointment in a few weeks."
"A few weeks?" Steve asked incredulously.

The receptionist seemed to look at him with pity. "Miss Potts is a very busy woman. Is there a name that you'd like to put on the appointment?"

Steve frowned. "Can you just call her up and tell her that Steve is here to see her?"

She sighed, but the implacable look on Steve's face indicated that it was going to be easier for her to humor him and call upstairs. "Miss Potts, a Steve," she paused leadingly for a moment.

"Rogers," he supplied.

"Steve Rogers here for you." There was a short silence, where her brows shot into her hair and she looked at Steve in a new light. "Of course, Miss Potts. I'll send him right up."

Steve suppressed a smirk as he walked towards the elevators, riding the lift to Pepper's floor. Her assistant waved him in with a small smile and Pepper greeted him with a warm hug.

"Steve!" She led him to one of the cushy chairs in front of her desk. "What brings you here?"

Steve winced slightly. "Well, it's - ,"

"Tony," they finished together, and Pepper laughed at Steve's sheepish expression. She leaned back in her seat, gesturing with her hand. "What happened?"

With a sigh, he told her the whole story, from his initial meeting with Director Fury to the argument with Tony that morning.

"And then he just said 'no,' like that was supposed to be enough for me." He met her eyes, completely unaware of how much like a consternated toddler he looked. "That is not a reason."

"That is a reason for Tony," she told him with some amusement. "You have to remember that, when Tony isn't working in his lab, he is essentially a very large five year old."

"I've noticed. It's why he and Clint get along so well," Steve replied dryly. "But 'no' isn't an answer that I can take to Director Fury."

"No," she agreed. "It isn't."

When she continued to merely look at him, he felt his brows rise in mild shock. "You want me to lie to Director Fury?"

She shrugged. "Why not? He's lied to you. God knows what else he's keeping secret."

"You might have a point," he admitted hesitantly. "But right now, the only thing that's keeping us from getting a handler is Tony's unfounded opinion that no one will work."

She laughed lightly at him. "Tony doesn't have opinions, Steve. He has convictions."

The soldier frowned, leaning forward in his seat. "What's the difference?"

"Opinions are what a person feels," she clarified with amusement. "Convictions are based in fact, and since everything Tony says is correct, he has convictions rather than opinions."

Steve rubbed at his temples, thinking idly that he'd have a massive headache if not for the serum. "So it's his conviction that no one at SHIELD is going to be good enough?"
"Tony doesn't like people, as a whole," Pepper said seriously. "And he certainly doesn't trust SHIELD. So putting both of those together in the form of a new handler is tantamount to a physical attack on him."

Steve nodded in understanding. "I think I get it," he murmured. "Thank you for your help, Pepper."
"Anytime," she replied with a smile.

Steve only knew that Clint had slipped into his room because he'd been waiting for the archer to make an appearance. Clint was silent, suddenly appearing in the doorway where he hadn't been before and quietly closing it behind him. Steve continued to fold a pair of trousers in preparation for the possibility of an overnight stay on the helicarrier, studiously avoiding Clint's gaze.

"Is there something you wanted to talk about?"

Clint shifted wordlessly on his feet. "Coulson was my best friend."

"So you'd mentioned," Steve murmured, flicking his eyes in Clint's direction. At Clint's flinching movement, he realized that the archer wasn't yet comfortable enough to hold a normal conversation, with eye contact. Retrieving a shirt from the closet, Steve held his tongue and waited.

"He was more than my best friend," Clint murmured, trying to emphasize the extent of emotions that he was still trying to work through. Steve looked taken aback and Clint's forehead furrowed in question.

The soldier's brows suddenly shot to his hairline and he glanced at Clint, startled. "You were together?"

The emphasis on the word and the Captain's tone alerted Clint, who met Steve's eyes and realized exactly what he was asking.

"Fuck," he swore, running a hand through his hair.

"I thought that you and Nat were married," Steve offered hesitantly.

"We are!"

Steve nodded, not giving Clint the chance to clarify. "So it's a special marriage? Of convenience?"

Clint made a strangled noise in the back of his throat. "No!"

Steve straightened, his hands held outwards in a peaceful gesture. "There's nothing wrong with that. Even in the forties, there were a few fellas I knew that were of that mind, and they were some of the nicest guys I'd met."

"No," Clint replied forcefully. "I mean, no, there's nothing wrong with that, but, God, just, fucking no."

"Because of Natasha?"

Clint paused for a moment and heaved a sigh. "Yes."

Both men stood awkwardly, unsure of how to proceed, when Clint chuckled lightly and dropped into Steve's desk chair. The laughter broke the tension in the room, and both men relaxed.
The archer smiled up at Steve. "Coulson wasn't my lover," he said, smirking at the slight blush that graced the Captain's cheeks at the barest mention of sex. "But he was my closest friend. He was the one that was always there for me."

When Steve's face remained the same, Clint huffed, rubbing a hand across his brow as he tried to think of a good analogy. The realization hit him, and he leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees.

"Coulson was my Bucky," he explained and Steve's face cleared. "Are you ready to replace Bucky in your life?"

Steve blinked rapidly and shook his head, somewhat abashed. "No," he murmured, zipping his bag. "I think I see what you're getting at."

"It's not that I don't want a handler," Clint continued after a moment of quiet. "I know we need one. But - ,"

"You can't imagine anyone but Coulson in that position," Steve finished for him. Clint nodded and Steve sighed. "I don't know if I can get Director Fury to hold off any longer, but I'll see what I can do," he promised.

Clint offered him a half smile. "That's all I'm asking."

The doorbell rang loudly in Steve's ears and he motioned Clint out of his room, picking up the overnight bad he'd packed on his way. Clint trailed him curiously down the stairs and into the foyer. The soldier opened the front door, Clint at his shoulder, to meet with Agent Sitwell. Steve couldn't see Clint, but he felt the air thicken with tension immediately, the archer stiffening.

"No," Clint growled out, quietly furious. Sitwell seemed somewhat apologetic, nodding in response to Clint.

"For the record," the agent murmured. "I told him this was a bad idea."

Steve suddenly left the two men at the door and returned with his keys. Sitwell watched him inquiringly, faltering slightly at Steve's steely gaze.

"Let's go, Agent Sitwell," he said, his eyes flashing. "I think Director Fury and I have a few things to discuss."

Maria was waiting for Steve on deck when he arrived. She raised an eyebrow as Agent Sitwell followed him in an agency vehicle, looking rather chastened. Steve dismounted from his motorcycle with tense movements, and she whistled at the expression on his face.

"I take it this is not a social call," she murmured as they walked inside.

"No, it isn't," Steve confirmed, stalking through the hallways and sending agents scattering out of his path. Reaching Director Fury's office door, he raised one fist and paused. Breathing deeply, he forced himself to calm before he knocked on the door with a little more force than was necessary.

Maria was watching him with wide eyes and he shook his head at her as he heard Fury's permission. Steve turned the knob and stepped inside, waving her back when she moved to follow him in.

"Director Fury," Steve greeted as Maria quietly closed the door. "Is there something in particular you needed?"
Fury seemed to gather himself, and the slight movement set Steve immediately on edge. "Why would you think that I needed you for something, Captain?"

"Agent Sitwell at our front door was a clue," Steve answered, clenching his hands at his sides to keep from crossing his arms defiantly. "So is there something that you needed?"

"Yes, Captain, there is." When Steve simply waited for him to continue, Fury motioned to the chair in front of his desk. The soldier took his seat and Fury spoke. "We've been sending out agents to the mansion as trial runs for the new handler."

"There's been more than one?" Steve asked, his curiosity overtaking his irritation for a moment.

Fury nodded. "It seems that Agent Whitman never made it past Mister Stark, and Agent Sayers couldn't breach the front gate."

"I'm not surprised," Steve returned, cursing himself for not realizing why Tony had implemented new security measures. "Tony isn't really a fan of unannounced visitors."

"We'd talked about assigning a new handler to the team," Fury pointed out, a slight edge to his voice.

"We never agreed on either the candidate or the time," Steve rejoined immediately, his irritation rapidly degenerating into anger. "You know this team better than most. There was no way you thought that stunt was going to work."

Fury was taken aback at the Captain's tone. "Stunt?"

Steve settled him with a look that actually made Fury feel like a scolded eight year old. "Sending the greenest agents out to Stark Hall without any warning or backup? You knew Tony was going to rip them apart and send them packing. And Agent Sitwell was completely out of line, from what I understand. So my question is, why did you do it?"

Fury sighed softly, the gesture surprising Steve. The director glanced at him through the lashes of his remaining eye and, seemingly coming to a decision, he held one hand aloft in a gesture of surrender. "You needed the push."

It was only after he spoke that Fury seemed to realize that it had been the exact wrong thing to say. Steve's eyes narrowed dangerously and his whole body tensed.

"Like before Midtown?" he asked, his voice taut. "Not a push, but manipulation?"

Steve would later learn that the stress of losing trusted agents, the battle, and its aftermath finally culminated in the face of Captain America's disapproval. Fury snapped.

"I run the largest covert military branch on the planet. I send my people out there to save lives. I save lives, damn it, and I still can't operate without mistrust from your team."

The captain raised one slightly sardonic eyebrow. "Maybe you're not really earning anyone's trust."

"I am saving the damn world," Fury snarled. "That should be enough."

"Maybe you're doing right by the world," Steve said softly, looking far wiser than anyone had a right to be at the tender age of twenty seven. "But you're not doing right by us."

Fury stilled, and Steve took it as a sign to continue.

"You push and nudge and move us like pieces across a chessboard that we never really get to see,
and expect us to blindly accept when other pieces are removed. You never tell anyone the whole story, never trust us with your secrets."

Fury snorted. "Covert, Captain. We're spies."

Steve laughed, to his utter surprise. "Natasha told me the same thing once," he explained. "But a team can't function when there are secrets between them."

"Are you saying you can't function under SHIELD?"

Steve settled a small glare at the director. "I'll thank you not to put words in my mouth," he chastised. "I'm saying that you're going to have to give a little if you want us to play nicely. Because I can guarantee that we won't stand for anything less."

"We?" Fury raised his brow at the captain.

"Yes," Steve affirmed, rising to his feet and offering his hand to Fury. "We."

Maria was waiting for him in the hallway when he emerged from Director Fury's office and Steve bit back a smile at the anxiousness of her stance. "Did it go well?"

"Not terribly, no," he admitted, falling into step beside her as they walked back towards the landing pads. "I still can't understand how he thought that was going to work."

"Director Fury always has a plan," she reminded him with a sidelong glance. "We might not understand it, but it usually works."

Steve chuckled. "I'm hard pressed to see how this plan, if it was one, worked, Maria."

"It got you to come in and talk to him, didn't it?" She smirked lightly at him and he wrinkled his nose in consternation, grudgingly accepting her explanation. She continued down the hall and he trailed after her.

"But that doesn't help our situation any. We still don't have a liaison," he confessed. "Because that meeting ended without a decision being made."

"I could do it," she offered and the carefully blank expression on her face told Steve that she hadn't quite decided that she wanted to say the words aloud. Wisely, he chose to focus simply on her proposal.

A sudden thought penetrated his mind and he turned to her. "Did Director Fury put you up to this?"

She whirled on him and her eyes flashed and he was, despite Natasha's gentle reminders and his own awareness, strikingly reminded of Peggy. "No, Captain Rogers," she replied icily. "He did not."

They stood in a stalemate, sizing each other up while the corridors began filling with new agents as the briefing sessions ended. Steve finally sighed, looking contrite.

"I'm sorry," he offered, nudging her forward again to escape the crush that was emerging from the door directly behind him. "But I had to be sure."

"I know," she replied lightly. She sent him another small glare over her shoulder, just enough to let him know that she was still irritated by his question, no matter how much she understood his motives. "That doesn't mean I'm happy about it."
He chuckled softly, taking her arm and steering her through another group that was making their way to the mess hall. They walked in silence for a few minutes, trying to reach a clear space. "Did you mean it?" he murmured beneath his breath, keeping his eyes studiously forward.

She tilted her head to acknowledge his question, ignoring the curious gaze of a veteran agent. Maria waved as they passed and ducked into an empty corridor, pulling him into the shadows. Looking up and meeting his eyes, she finally answered firmly.

"Yes."

"We're not all that easy to get along with," he reminded her gently, shifting on his feet. She acquiesced with a nod of her head, her gaze focusing on a spot on the wall just over his shoulder.

"Clint and Natasha need a special touch," she murmured. "Phil knew just how to handle them." She smiled slightly, her eyes sad. "I'm not Phil, that's for damned sure, but I'll be better for them than a green agent."

Steve studied her for a long moment, gauging her sincerity. "If you think you can manage it," he said slowly, with a slight smile.

She smiled back, leading him out onto the deck of the helicarrier. "I'll be there tomorrow morning."

"Breakfast is at nine," he told her as they approached the Quinjet that was waiting to take him back to the mainland. He turned to her with a grin. "I'll make pancakes."

Maria swiveled to stare at him. "You cook?"

He laughed, a deep, full-bellied laugh that turned heads from every corner of deck. "You've got a lot to learn."

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Tony flicked his eyes upwards as the garage door opened and the loud roaring of Steve's motorcycle echoed down the ramp. Dropping the new weapon prototype he'd been toying with for Natasha, he crossed the distance in measured strides and was standing next to Steve by the time the soldier parked.

Glancing up at Tony's implacable face, Steve sighed. "I'm not telling you anything," he informed the billionaire sternly. "You can find out what happened with everyone else."

"That's not any fun," Tony complained, careful to keep his voice light. Pepper had already fussed at him once over this whole situation; he did not need a repeat experience. Shaking the unpleasant memory from his mind, he realized that Steve had started towards the stairs to the main floor and was talking.

" – hope you haven't done anything to my kitchen while I was gone."

Tony snorted, lengthening his steps to catch up. "You were gone for less than a day, so I haven't had the chance to rearrange the cabinets like I planned." He tried not to grin at Steve's sudden glare, and settled for rolling his eyes with amusement. "You didn't even stay the night like you said you were going to."

Something flashed across Steve's face, hardening his features for a split second and igniting Tony's curiosity. "No," he muttered. "I didn't."

The soldier picked up speed and took the stairs four at a time, leaving Tony in his wake. Pepper was
talking quietly with Thor in the kitchen and both looked up at Steve's entrance. Pepper smiled at him.

"Hi Steve," she greeted. "Did you have a nice trip?"

Steve gritted his teeth, reminding himself that Pepper had done nothing to deserve his irritation. "Not particularly," he admitted, cursing the way her face fell and Thor stood at attention. "We need to get everyone together."

The demi-god nodded. "I will collect the assassins."

"I think Bruce is in his room," Pepper offered, moving around the kitchen table as Thor stepped onto the patio and headed towards the range. She paused at his side, laying a gentle hand on his tensed arm.

Appreciating the gesture, he forced himself to relax minutely. She smiled softly at him and continued on her way. Steve let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding and collapsed into a chair at the table, resting his head in his hands. He heard Tony approach, but he couldn't quite bring himself to move. The billionaire settled himself in the chair across from Steve.

"Must have been one hell of a meeting," he commented lightly after a few moments of quiet.

Steve's response was to press the heels of his palms deeper into his eye sockets.

Tony pursed his lips, ignoring Pepper and Bruce's entrance. "Do I really have to wait?"

"Yes." Steve's muttered reply was buried beneath Pepper's admonition of "Stop badgering him, Tony." Bruce pulled a glass from the cabinet and poured some water, setting it quietly on the table in front of Steve.

The soldier smiled gratefully at him, taking a long sip as Thor returned with Clint and Natasha. Clint hesitated upon seeing Steve's weary expression, but took a place beside the captain regardless. The group sat silently for a moment, unused to seeing Steve looking so worn, and waited for him to speak.

"I hate to disparage anyone, but Director Fury was playing with us," he finally said, turning his glass in his hands. Tony snorted, but held his cutting remark when Pepper swatted him on the shoulder. Thor leaned forward, interested, and Natasha shifted closer to Clint. "He directly ignored my advice and sent new agents out to force our hand and get us to agree to a new handler of his choosing."

"And that is?"

Steve glanced over at Bruce's quiet prompting. "I don't know," he confessed. "We never made it to that, because I," he faltered slightly, abashed. "I may have dressed him down."

Tony burst into laughter and even the nervous Clint cracked a grin. "I would have paid to see that," Tony exclaimed, wiping one hand beneath his eyes.

"I'm sure there's footage, if you feel like hacking SHIELD's systems again," Natasha informed him, her eyes twinkling. Tony's face lit at the prospect, but Clint rapped on the table for his attention.

"I don't think Steve's done," the archer murmured, flicking his eyes back at the expectant soldier.

"No, I'm not." Attention was returned to Steve and he sighed, rubbing a tired hand across his brow. "Agent Hill offered to be our liaison."
His proclamation was met with stunned silence. Thor broke it first.

"She seems a fitting enough warrior to be our companion," he rumbled, glancing uncertainly at Natasha. She smiled lightly at him, nodding.

"Maria's good," she said. "She'd fit in fine, I think."

Bruce shrugged. "I have no problem with her."

Tony was steadfastly silent, glaring more in Steve's direction than at Steve. He pitched forward suddenly. "How do we know that Fury didn't put her up to this?"

"I asked her that myself," Steve assured him. "She said she wasn't."

Tony scoffed, leaning back and crossing his arms over his chest. "She's a spy, and spies lie. Right, Clint?"

Clint opened his mouth to respond, but Steve cut him off. "I know when someone is lying to me," the soldier countered, his voice carefully controlled. "She wasn't."

"I agree."

Tony glanced sharply at Clint. The archer met his friend's gaze resolutely, his own face unreadable. Tony tilted his head in silent question, and the table listened with interest.

"Trust me on this, Stark," Clint advised. "She's not doing this because of orders. She's doing this because she genuinely wants to help."

Tony raised a brow sardonically. "I don't think she wants to help me."

"It's not about you this time," Natasha murmured, her tone gentle. Tony blinked at her for a moment, his eyes flickering between her and her partner, before her meaning sunk in. Steve watched the exchange and then turned to the archer.

"Clint?" The man in question looked up at Steve, his eyes sad. "I'll leave it up to you."

Clint let out a shuddering breath, picking at the dirt beneath his nails. He nodded absentmindedly to himself, the movement gaining purpose after a second.

"I say we take her."

When the impromptu meeting had ended and everyone had dispersed, Steve was not surprised to see Tony remain at the table.

"I figured you still had something to say," he murmured as he walked over to the main JARVIS interface at the end of the counter. Pulling up the website for their local pizzeria, he began to key in their usual order.

Tony rose from his seat and joined him, peering curiously at the screen. "How did you figure that?"

Steve snorted, finishing the order and turning to face Tony with a half grin. "You always have something more to say."

"True." The billionaire shrugged, leaning back against the table. "So when is she coming?"
Steve faltered under Tony's sardonic stare. After an expectant pause, the soldier slumped.

"Tomorrow at nine. She'll be here for breakfast." When Tony rolled his eyes, Steve protested. "I would have called her and told her not to come if we'd decided against bringing her in."

"But you wanted her to come."

Steve flushed slightly. "No."

"Yes, you did," Tony countered sympathetically. "She reminds you of Peggy Carter and you crave that, even if you don't realize it."

Steve looked down at his toes and Tony got the feeling that he'd be scuffing his shoe against the floor in the manner of small boys, if he weren't completely sure that Tony would never stop mocking him for it. There was a moment's pause, and then Steve glanced back up at Tony.

"Is it so wrong to miss my friends?"

Tony sighed, feeling utterly inadequate for this kind of conversation. It was a testament to the strength of their friendship that Steve crossed the room to the bar and poured Tony a drink while the billionaire thought of words that were, at least, not detrimental, if not completely helpful.

"It's not bad that you miss people," Tony mulled as he sipped at his scotch. "It's perfectly natural, so I'm told. But you can't keep living like you're expecting them to walk around the corner at every turn. Think about what it would be like if my brain was still stuck in Afghanistan, or Natasha was still in Russia."

Steve was silent, long enough for Tony to finish his scotch and contemplate getting another. Giving in to the temptation, he poured a splash into the tumbler and eyed Steve.

The realization took longer than he cared to admit, but when everything finally clicked, Tony broke into a wide grin.

"You like her, don't you"

Steve's head shot up, his cheeks pale. "What?"

"You have an enormous crush on Hellfire Hill," Tony reiterated, laughing. When Steve simply stared at him, his brow slightly furrowed, Tony elaborated. "You think she's pretty and you want to spend time with her."

Steve raised a brow and his voice was practically dripping with sarcasm. "A lot of dames are pretty, Tony. That doesn't mean that I want to take them out."

"Word to the wise, Spangles," Tony advised. "Don't call them 'dames'. They don't really appreciate that anymore."

Steve smirked lightly, his eyes distant. "They never really did."

Tony watched his friend for another moment before he decided to pounce. Swirling the scotch in his glass, he studiously avoided looking at Steve.

"You know," he began conversationally, trying not to notice the subtle tensing of Steve's shoulders. "You never denied wanting to spend time with her. Or that you thought she was pretty."

Steve froze and Tony watched in fascination as he forced himself to relax. The soldier met his eyes
with a shuttered gaze.

"I shouldn't have invited her without consulting the team first," he admitted. "I'm sorry."

"Okay, that's not where I thought this conversation was going," Tony muttered into his scotch, suddenly thankful that he'd given into the temptation of a second glass.

"But," Steve continued doggedly. "I told her to come because she knew that Clint and Natasha were going to need a handler that knew them and was sympathetic to their situation. She seemed to understand that. That's why I invited her."

Tony nodded, his eyes oddly wise. "But you do like her."

To be continued in Chapter Nine.
"You must remember, family is often born of blood, but it doesn't depend on blood. Nor is it exclusive of friendship. Family members can be your best friends, you know. And best friends, whether or not they are related to you, can be your family."

— Trenton Lee Stewart, *The Mysterious Benedict Society*

"The most important thing in life is your family. There are days you love them, and others you don't, but in the end they're the people you always come home to. Sometimes it's the family you're born into, and sometimes it's the one you make for yourself."

— Candice Bergen, *Sex and the City*

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Chapter Ten

Steve had never confirmed nor denied Tony's observation, which simply cemented it as fact for the billionaire. After a few more stammered denials, Steve had declared the conversation to be over and went upstairs to inform the others of Maria's impending arrival. Clint was conspicuously absent from the proceedings, and the assembly ended quickly after the announcement as everyone drifted to their rooms for the night.

Tony, naturally, retreated to his lab to check the gate's security system and deactivate the extra measures for the morning, but was soon distracted by a project for Natasha. It was well past two and his eyes were dry when he finally surfaced to find a drink. The lounge was dark, save for the patio light that trickled in through the glass doors, and he busied himself with a glass of the first bottle he came across.

There was soft noise on the stairs and Tony looked up from the bar as Clint stumbled down, glaring in the billionaire's direction. He grinned. "Red kick you out of bed?"

"Shut up, Stark," the archer mumbled, shuffling into the kitchen. Clint opened the fridge, ignoring Tony, and began rooting around. Tony narrowed his eyes at the slight. "Spangles has a crush on Hellfire Hill."

"I knew that would get your attention," Tony grinned, slightly giddy. Pouring the contents of his glass down the sink, he continued, "Come on, Katniss. There's better liquor in my lab."

Clint groaned, but closed the door and followed obligingly. "I just wanted a fucking bottle of water."

"Water is overrated. Scotch is amazing," Tony countered, picking his way through the dark house with ease, Clint trailing him effortlessly.

"How do you know he likes her, anyway?"

Tony pivoted mid-step, forcing Clint to hop back. "He told me."
"Bullshit," Clint replied, both brows raised in disbelief.

Tony shrugged, continuing on his way. "Maybe not in so many words, but he does. I know it."

"So, why are you dragging me down to your lab at an ungodly hour to talk to me about it?"

"Because she'll be here tomorrow morning." Clint stilled, and Tony sent him a compassionate gaze. "I don't think he realized what he was doing when he invited her. And, if it makes you feel any better, he was going to call her and tell her no."

Clint shrugged, slipping into the lab after Tony. "Wouldn't really matter. She'd be coming either way. Like Banner said, no point in putting it off."

Tony hummed an agreement and dipped his hand into his desk drawer, finally emerging with a bottle of his favorite scotch. "Unless there was a better option."

Clint shook his head, filching the bottle from Tony and opening it. "There's really not," he admitted, drinking straight from the container. "If I had to pick anyone, it'd be Maria."

"I didn't realize the two of you were such good friends," Tony murmured, accepting the proffered scotch.

Clint snorted, hitching himself onto the workbench. "Yeah, well, that's because you pissed her off so bad she refused to be in the same room as you unless it was a direct order."

"I did nothing," Tony protested, holding his hands out in a gesture of innocence.

"You were you," Clint reminded him with a grin. "That's enough for Maria."

Tony took another drink and gave the bottle back to Clint, dropping into his chair. "Well, she'll have to get over that if she's going to be our liaison."

Clint nodded, shooting the billionaire a look at the conscious use of 'liaison' rather than 'handler.' "She will. If she's going to do something, she does it right."

"Know that from experience?" Tony leaned forward, his expression teasing. "Should Red be worried?"

Clint chuckled. "I am not Maria's type," he said wryly. "She treats me more like her annoying little brother."

"And you don't play that up whatsoever."

The archer shrugged, swallowing a mouthful of scotch and handing it back. "I do what I can."

"She doesn't seem like the happy-go-lucky, have fun, teasing type," Tony offered after a few moments of quiet, spinning the bottle idly on the desk. "Too straight-laced."

"Yeah, well, you don't really know her, do you?" Clint's tone wasn't offensive, but forceful enough to give Tony pause.

"It would seem not," the billionaire softly agreed.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, passing the bottle back and forth until Clint spoke. "She'll need a place to stay."

Tony stared at Clint, one hand outstretched for the scotch. "She has the helicarrier," he said slowly.

"Agent has a room here. Don't think that I don't know about that," he replied, pointing a finger at Clint and finally snatching the bottle. "And Agent was different. He liked me."

Clint sighed, shifting to face Tony better. "Don't you want to watch Steve trip around her every, single day? Because I think that would be fucking hilarious."

Tony hesitated for a split second. "That would be pretty funny," he acknowledged. "But is having her here a good idea? Really?"

Clint took a moment to think in the wake of Tony's sudden solemnity. "For as long as I've known her, Maria has been one of Phil's best friends. There was a point in time where it was just the four of us: me and Phil and Nat and Maria. Mine and Nat's allegiance was always to Phil rather than SHIELD. And I think that hers was too."

"Takes a lot to go from SHIELD to Agent," Tony murmured, studiously staring at the garage rather than Clint. "Must have been something huge."

"Not really," Clint offered quietly. "It was just a lot of little things. But they worked." Returning his attention to Tony, he knocked the back of his knuckle against the bottle of scotch. "Think about it."

Hopping lightly off the workbench, Clint quietly left the lab, leaving Tony to silently regard the scotch in his bottle.

At precisely eight fifty-five in the morning, Maria knocked on the door to the newly rechristened Avengers Mansion. Peering carefully at the doorjamb, she could see the faint scratches from the champagne bottle Tony had insisted on breaking in celebration. Smiling lightly, her attention was diverted as she heard footsteps advancing on the door. Standing up straight, she smoothed one errant lock behind her ear and waited.

There was a small scuffle behind the door and she bit her lip, releasing it as the door flung open to reveal Pepper, looking rather disheveled, and Tony, looking somewhat chastened.

Pepper smiled brightly at her. "Welcome to the mansion, Agent Hill," she greeted warmly. Tony let out a grunt of pain when she elbowed him in the ribs. "We're all so glad to see you."

Maria felt her lips tug upwards in a smirk. "I'm sure."

"Please, come in." Pepper stepped back, opening the door further to let Maria slip inside. "Steve almost has breakfast ready. I'm sure that you'll all have details to smooth out after we eat."

Pepper chattered aimlessly as she led Maria through the entry and into the open den that backed up against the kitchen. Maria resolutely ignored Tony's piercing gaze as she followed his assistant-turned-CEO and girlfriend.

Steve was standing at the stove, expertly ladling a spoonful of batter into a skillet. Clint and Natasha waited patiently at the table, each sipping at a mug of coffee. Thor tumbled down the stairs, nodding once in her direction as Bruce slid open the patio door and stepped in.

The scientist smiled shyly at her while he hung his coat on the coat tree. "Good morning, Agent Hill."
The assassins turned at his welcome. Natasha looked far more awake than her partner, which was no surprise, and waved lightly at Maria. Steve glanced over his shoulder and grinned widely, shooting Tony a glare at the latter's sudden snort of laughter.

She smiled a greeting at everyone and slid into the seat beside Natasha. "Good morning, everyone."

The assembled group returned her salutation with murmured "good morning"s of their own, each with various levels of enthusiasm, depending on their owner's state of consciousness. Bruce handed each of them a plate while Pepper passed out the cutlery.

"The rule in this house," Tony announced as he slipped into his seat. "Is that you make yourself at home. Cups are in that cabinet," he said, pointing to one of the doors. "Plates in that one, silverware in that drawer, et cetera."

Maria nodded her understanding and Steve set a plate heaped high with pancakes on the table, Thor following with platters of bacon and eggs. Natasha delicately leaned forward and began piling her plate, signaling Maria that there was no cause for ceremony at the morning meal. Bruce quietly passed her a cup of coffee that she accepted gratefully, and the group tucked into their food.

When everyone had eaten their fill, Clint stood and collected dishes, handing them to Bruce who began to fill the dishwasher. Steve leaned forward in his chair, resting his elbows on the table and glancing at the room at large.

"Shall we?"

Maria nodded, glancing over when Clint retook his seat. "There are no papers to sign, nothing that makes this truly official."

"So you can leave when you choose?" Pepper punched Tony's shoulder as Maria bit back on a snippy reply.

"So that you may dismiss me when you choose," she murmured, flicking her eyes towards him and meeting his steely gaze. "This is completely under your control. That was one of the stipulations that Director Fury and I discussed yesterday when I offered for the position."

"How did he take that?" Natasha stood and refilled her cup, bringing the coffee pot back to the table and setting it beside Tony. "He can't have been happy about his first officer voluntarily leaving her post."

"He wasn't," Maria confirmed lightly, sipping at her coffee. "But he soon realized that there wasn't much of a choice."

Bruce chuckled softly. "Would no one else accept us?"

"It seems that you've all required a bit of a reputation," she admitted, smiling slyly. The Avengers shared a laugh at the information.

"So," Steve muttered, drawing the conversation back to him. "Where do we go from here?"

Maria took a drink, simply to gather her thoughts and compose herself, now that she was the center of attention. "There's not really a guidebook for this," she murmured, running her finger along the rim of her cup. "But I think it'd be best for me to get to know you all, as individuals and as a team. That way, I can better advise Fury on how to act when you're all concerned."

Her proclamation was met with silence for a long enough moment that Maria began to worry that
she'd misspoken. Eyes gradually turned to Clint, who sat quietly contemplating his coffee. He finally looked up at Natasha's stern nudge and blinked at the attention his quietness had garnered.

"It sounds solid to me," he said, reaching for the coffeepot. He glanced at Tony meaningfully. "She'll need a place to stay."

The billionaire narrowed his eyes, leaning back in his chair with crossed arms. "Helicarrier."

Maria watched with interest as Clint visibly gathered himself. "That's too far for a commute."

"Pep makes that trip every day," Tony replied glibly. "If she can do it, I'm sure a SHIELD Agent should have no problem."

"Tony." Maria raised her eyebrows at the pleading look on Clint's face. Tony wrestled with himself for a moment before he rolled his eyes and sighed.

"Fine." Addressing Maria and ignoring the pointed glances that the others were sending around the table. "There's a spare bedroom upstairs. It should be ready enough for you."

"Thank you," Maria murmured, trying to catch Clint's eye.

The light of Tony's grudging permission, Pepper took charge. "Have you got your luggage here?"

"I did come prepared," Maria admitted. "My bags are in the car."

Natasha frowned. "I didn't hear a car."

"I left it at the end of the drive," Maria admitted. "The gates wouldn't open, so I scaled them."

Steve shot a frown at Tony, who held his hands up innocently. "I got distracted."

"It's fine," Maria assured with slight amusement. "I'll go down and get the car. Security should be up to date by the time I get there, don't you think?"

"It will," Steve murmured firmly. "Would you like some company?"

"I'll be fine on my own, thank you." She rose from the table with a tentative smile, prompting Steve to stand as well. "I'll be back in a bit."

Steve walked her to the door and the two women remaining in the room rounded on Tony with black glares. "It wasn't on purpose, I swear!"

"You go down there and you put her in the system right now," Pepper insisted.

"I'm going, I'm going," Tony mumbled, snatching her coffee cup and taking it with him. As he turned to descend into the labs, he caught sight of Clint silently trailing him. "Are you going to yell at me too?"

"No," the archer replied, nonchalant as they continued down the stairs. "Don't really see the point in it."

"Good," Tony muttered as he plopped into his seat. He pulled up the security protocols on his worktop and fiddled with the code for a few minutes while Clint waited quietly. "Fixed now, anyway."

Clint chuckled at him. "You sound like a baby. Quit whining."
Tony glared at him. "Did you sleep well last night? Because I didn't."

"That's your own fault," Clint informed him. "You're the one that stayed up most of the night in here."

"Because my lab is amazing," Tony swiftly replied. "What is that noise?"

"Huh?" Clint frowned at Tony in momentary confusion.

"That," the billionaire emphasized, waving a hand towards the garage door. "It sounds like Hulk and Thor are having a roaring contest."

Clint was suddenly alert, staring out at the entrance to the garage. When the loud growl paused at the door, Clint turned and slammed a hand into the opener. The door eased open and a battered, gray truck proceeded to rumble down the ramp, the low growl of the muffler intensifying in the confined space. Maria pulled the truck into the open space beside Pepper's Acura and threw it into park. The door hinges creaked loudly in the open garage as she stepped out with a knowing smirk.

"What the fuck is that?" Clint glanced over at the exclamation, raising an eyebrow at Tony's horrified stare. He turned back to the vehicle, inspecting it as he approached.

"My truck," he drawled, as Maria dropped the tailgate and climbed into the bed.

Tony's brows slammed down over his eyes and he stood. "It's hideous. And it's loud. And it smells weird."

"No," Clint told him patiently, reaching out a hand for Maria's luggage. He rolled his eyes minutely as he continued scolding Tony. "That's you. How long have you been down here, again?"

Tony waved a hand. "I was up and out of the lab yesterday. You know that. And the day before, too."

"Did you remember to shower when you were up there?"

"Inconsequential," Tony replied dismissively. He peered down at the truck's bumper, brows raised. "Are those stickers? You have bumper stickers?"

Clint shrugged, accepting Maria's bags and placing them on the ground. "It's not inconsequential if you're smelling that rank. Tasha will drug you on principle this time."

"Spangles would never allow that," Tony told him without a hint of sarcasm. "He's soft. And, seriously?"

"Seriously what?" Clint followed the line of Tony's finger.

"'God bless our soldiers, but especially our snipers'!?" The corners of his mouth twitched upwards. "That's precious."

"If you like that," Maria interrupted with a smile, dropping lightly from the bed of the truck to the floor. "You'll love the other one."

Tony dropped his gaze to the other side of the bumper and barked out a laugh. "'Don't bother running; you'll only die tired.'"

Clint grinned, a feral edge to the expression. "That one is very fitting."
"Good to know," Tony replied and a slightly uncomfortable silence fell. He raised a brow at Clint. "Aren't you going to escort her upstairs?"

Clint rolled his eyes again, but picked up Maria's bags and started towards the stairs. Maria smiled at Tony as she followed Clint, glancing around her surroundings with concealed interest. The archer pointed out a few things along the way as they traipsed upstairs to the second floor bedrooms.

"Not that one," she heard Steve say suddenly and, as they came up on the landing, they saw Thor confusedly closing the door on their left. Maria glanced over when Clint gave Steve a quick nod, but she ignored the exchange. Steve smiled genially and opened the door on the right. "You can have this one. It's right next to Bruce and there's a nice view of the backyard."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," she assured the soldier, walking in after Clint. The archer had dropped her bags by the door and made himself at home on the bed. She raised an eyebrow at his audacity, but said nothing and peeked out of the window at the backyard. Steve lingered for a moment, making sure that Maria was settled and everything was fine, before he slipped out of the room. Maria softly closed the door behind him and faced Clint. "Something you want to talk about?"

Clint simply stared back at her, and she sighed. "I know it's not ideal."

"Better than last time I had a new handler," he muttered wryly and she grinned.

"Well, that is true," she admitted, taking a seat next to him on the bed. "I promise to listen to you and not get you shot."

"Thanks for that," he said, laughing a little. They both fell silent for a few minutes. "You know that I'd pick you, if I had to."

"I know," she returned lightly. "But you and I would both rather that I wasn't here."

"Yeah." He sighed heavily and dropped his gaze to his clasped hands. "Can't do anything now, though."

"I'll do what I can," she promised. "My loyalty is not to Fury. Hasn't been in a very long time."

"I know," he returned. "Neither has mine."

She chuckled. "Yours never was. And now, it's to this team. Isn't it?"

He quiet for a few moments and she had the fleeting thought that she'd misread him and the situation. "Yeah," he finally murmured. "Yeah, I think it is."

Maria woke slowly the next morning, momentarily disoriented by the soft sheets and the pale lilac of the walls and Natasha's presence in her bedroom. Rising, she pushed the covers back and ran a hand through her hair. "You're lucky that I don't keep a Glock under my pillow like you do," she said by way of greeting.

"I always thought that was a bad habit of yours," the redhead commented idly. "It's almost time for breakfast."

Maria glared lightly at her friend. "I was told last night that meals had no set times."

"They don't," Natasha agreed. "But Steve's done around eight and you'll have to get there before Clint if you want any bacon or biscuits. And there's no cause to impress, so pajamas are acceptable
"Thanks for the warning," Maria groaned as she rolled out of bed. "Let's go then."

Natasha's information was perfectly accurate, as expected, and they arrived to Steve setting the table. He greeted them with a smile.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked, reaching back for a handful of silverware. Natasha paused in her pursuit of coffee, glancing from Steve to Maria with veiled interest.

Maria ignored her and nodded. "I did, thank you." Stepping towards the far side of the kitchen, she pointed at a cabinet. "Mugs, right?"

"Right," Steve confirmed, pulling out the pot to fill the two cups she'd removed.

"Wait!"

They turned to face Natasha, Maria with more confusion than Steve. The redhead narrowed her gaze at him and he rolled his eyes, filling the two mugs. "Bruce and I already had ours. Pepper made this pot before she went to force Tony out of the lab."

"Suicide," Natasha muttered, accepting the proffered cup.

Maria smirked at her. "Trying to force Stark out of his lab or drinking Steve's coffee?"

"Both."

"My coffee isn't bad," he protested, pulling a stack of plates from the cabinet.

Natasha snorted, taking a seat. "No, it's just strong as steel. You may as well be chewing the grounds."

"Don't drink Steve's coffee," Maria said. "Got it. Where is Doctor Banner, anyway?"

"Right here," he announced, stepping in from the patio and removing his coat. "You can call me Bruce. We're all going to be working together for a while, I think."

"I'd like to think we are," Maria confirmed with a smile.

"Including out in the field?"

She cocked her head at him quizzically. "It's possible, yes," she admitted.

He took a deep breath. "Then you need to meet Hulk."

Maria shrugged, taking a sip of her coffee. "Okay."

Bruce stared at her, seemingly astonished at her indifference. He visibly rallied himself and stepped closer. "I think you may have misheard me," he said delicately.

"I didn't," she replied, shooting Steve a look at his soft chuckle. Setting her mug down, she faced Bruce fully. "I'm just not that concerned about it."

Natasha frowned, leaning forward and sharing a look with Bruce. "Explain."

"If we're going to be honest," Maria began.
"Let's," Bruce interjected lightly.

Maria shot him a look. "You're this concerned just talking about it. That means that the team will be out in full force. You'll probably be flanking me with weapons ready. Why on Earth would I be worried?"

Steve chuckled, turning from the refrigerator. "She has a point," he said wryly, a carton of eggs in hand. "Look how it was when we introduced him to Nat."

Bruce rolled his eyes. "I'm just trying to cover all of the bases. The last thing we need is for him to get angry."

"And it's appreciated, Bruce," Maria said. "So let's do this right. How did you handle it last time?"

"Bruce talked to him first."

Maria stared at Bruce after Natasha's comment. "You what?"

"They can communicate," Steve confirmed. "And Hulk is generally aware of what goes on. So, Bruce can talk to him and make sure that he knows what's going to happen when we're all out there. He's not mindless."

"I never said that he was," Maria was quick to point out. Clint lurched into the kitchen, followed by Thor, and slid into a seat. She raised her brows at the archer. "It's nice to know that some things don't change."

"Fuck you," he replied hoarsely, without heat. He squinted at Steve. "Food?"

"It's almost done," Steve assured him. "Here's some coffee in the meantime."

"Thanks." Clint curled himself around the cup that Steve placed in front of him. Looking up, he frowned. "Where did Banner go?"

"I think he's going to talk to Hulk about Maria," Natasha answered, pointing to the patio doors and causing the newest member of the team to glare at her.

"You make me sound like a disease," Maria complained, standing to refill her cup. "That's not nice, Nat."

"What's not nice?" Pepper stepped in from the patio, slipping her coat off and hanging it on the rack. "I just saw Bruce heading out to the garden."

"Nat's being mean to Maria. Everything's normal," Clint muttered. "What were you doing outside?"

"Oh." Pepper accepted a cup of coffee from Steve. "Well, Tony finished Natasha's new gloves and he took them to the range. I was just out there making sure he came inside to eat something and get some rest."

"He's not following you, in case you want to know," Steve told her.

Pepper sighed. "I was worried about that. Thor, do you mind?"

The demi-god looked up at her with wide eyes. "I beg your pardon?"

"Go outside and stand at the range until Tony comes back inside," Pepper requested. "Please."
"Of course," Thor said immediately, standing. "I shall not return without him."

Maria watched Thor go with raised brows and Pepper smiled. "I often find that the threat is a greater deterrent than the actual punishment."

Maria laughed lightly, dropping a spoonful of eggs on her plate. "You've got this down to an art."

"I have had the practice," Pepper reminded her. "And I wanted to talk to you about something. When you're finished, of course."

"Of course," Maria agreed. Tony soon sulked in from the outside, Thor trailing him with amusement, and breakfast continued as usual.

When the plates were cleaned, Pepper motioned to Maria and the two made their way up to Maria's room. The brunette gestured to the desk chair, waiting until Pepper took a seat before she eased herself onto the bed.

"Was there something that you wanted to talk to me about?"

Pepper sighed softly, frowning. "I'm sure that they haven't told you, but you may have seen it on TV. There's been some issues concerning public opinion."

"I've heard." Maria tucked her leg beneath her. "So?"

"Tony gets invitations in the mail all the time for parties and dinners and such," Pepper said, leaning forward. "And I recently got one for the Maria Stark Foundation's annual gala that was addressed to the entire team. I think that they should go."

"Really?" Maria asked dubiously. "Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"I'll admit, they're a little," Pepper flailed for the word. "Ornery. But I really think that they should be getting out there. They're getting ripped apart by some of the politicians looking for reelection."

"And you think that a public appearance or two will help," Maria finished, nodding her head. She mulled Pepper's words for a few minutes. "I suppose it couldn't hurt. Unless, of course, there's an altercation."

"Of course," Pepper muttered darkly.

Having found Maria an agreeable accomplice, Pepper drove them both to New York to discuss the gala away from prying ears and give Bruce a little more time to get Hulk used to the idea of working with Maria. As the days wore on, Clint and Natasha grew more subdued, until one day they disappeared completely.

"Where is Barton?"

Steve looked down from the rafters. "Upstairs?"

Tony glowered at him. "Well, he should be here."

"Why?" Steve looked more amused than Tony thought he had the right to be. "Do you miss him?"

"No," Tony sulked. "But I have work he could be doing. Plug the pronged end into the third socket from the left."
Steve frowned, but did as Tony instructed. "Why, again, are we rewiring your lab?"

"Because I tend to do this twice a year when I go into hardware mode," the billionaire replied, pouring two glasses of water. Steve finished working with the wires and hopped down from the rafters.

"So twice a year," he repeated, accepting the drink with a nod of thanks. "You climb up all the way up there and rewire your lab?"

Tony nodded, making a face at his drink. "Seriously, it's got no flavor. How do you drink this?"

"It's water, Tony," Steve chided. "You're just used to it in ice form, cooling down your scotch." Tony snorted, and Steve grinned back. "Anyway, how did you get all the way up there in California? You don't have a ladder tall enough."

"The Iron Man suit."

Steve stared at Tony for a second, but he didn't appear to be joking. Steve frowned. "You just put the suit on and flew up there."

Tony pretended to think about it. "Pretty much, yeah."

"Why am I not surprised?" Steve murmured to himself. Taking a look around, he sighed. "Would you like me to go find Clint for you?"

"I don't care what you do," Tony replied. "It's his loss and I have no more use for you."

Rolling his eyes fondly at the billionaire, Steve left the lab and ascended the stairs. The first level was conspicuously empty, prompting Steve to take the stairs up to the second. The door to Phil's bedroom was slightly ajar, and he peeked in to find Natasha curled on the bed.

"Everything okay?" She looked up at him with red-rimmed eyes and he squirmed. "Nat?"

"It's Phil's birthday," she answered him thickly, and Steve understood.

"I see," he murmured. "Do you want some company?"

"I want you to find Clint," she said in reply. "You're a soldier. You'll understand him."

Steve scrutinized her for a moment, finally nodding. "Okay."

She smiled a thank you at him as he stole back into the hallway. Stepping away, Steve glanced up and found Thor looking questioningly at him. "I was not aware that this room was occupied."

'It's the room that Clint and Nat reserved for Phil Coulson," Steve explained quietly. "It's his birthday today, and they're, well, celebrating. In their own way."

"Is she feeling alright?" Steve held his hand out, wiggling it. Thor frowned. "Would she appreciate company? Asgardians have many rituals to celebrate departed comrades."

"I don't know, Thor," Steve answered honestly. "But I guess you can try. I'm going to go find Clint."

Leaving Thor in the hall, Steve headed towards the door that lead to the rooftop terrace when a chilly breeze curled around his ankles. Detouring back into his room for a jacket and a pair of socks, Steve stole into Clint's room and poked his head out of the window.
"Clint?"

The archer closed his eyes, knowing that his solitude had been too good to last. He heard a soft thump as Steve swung himself out onto the roof. Lifting a tequila bottle to his lips, Clint took a long draught as the soldier picked his way over the shingles to his side.

Sitting gingerly down, Steve quietly rested his forearms on his knees and stared out into the night. Clint offered him a drink from the bottle that Steve wordlessly declined. Contemplating the play of the moonlight on the tequila left, Clint began to think aloud.

"Today," he began, pausing to clear his voice when it was hoarse and rough from grief. "Today was Coulson's birthday."

Steve said nothing beside, offering only a steady presence to the archer's pain. Clint gave a little laugh.

"He hated birthdays, especially when people made a fuss. Said that SHIELD agents were supposed to blend in with everyone, to be the wallflowers of the world. Couldn't do that when someone slapped a party hat on your head and sang to you with a dessert lit on fire."

Clint tipped the bottle back as a loud clatter sounded from above them. Steve turned around as Tony slid down the roofline from one of the attic windows, reaching out an arm to steady himself against the former's broad shoulders. Regaining his balance, Tony inched around behind the seated pair and flopped down to Clint's right. Pulling a large flask from his jacket pocket, he clinked the container against Clint's bottle.

"Happy birthday," he murmured, taking a large swig. They sat companionably, the comfortable silence stretching into the night. Steve's sharp hearing could pick out Natasha's soft alto in the mansion as she spun stories to Bruce and Thor, who rumbled back to her ever so often. They were quiet for such a length of time that Clint surprised even himself when he spoke.

"Do you," he paused, licking his lips, and wondered if he was going to regret asking. "Do you still think about Bucky?"

Tony cocked an ear in their direction, turning to glance at Steve when the silence fell again. Clint kept his gaze focused on the dark woods, not daring to look at the soldier. There was another moment's pause, and then Steve's quiet voice filled the air.

"Every day," he murmured. "I don't think there's been a day that's gone by since he died, that I haven't thought about how I could have saved him." He paused, seemingly gathering himself, and dragged a hand across his chin in contemplation. "Sometimes, I find myself glancing over my shoulder to tell him something, like he's still going to be there."

"Yeah," Clint choked out roughly. "Me too."

He took a drink to cover the emotion in his voice, relishing in the burn of the alcohol in his throat. Steve dropped his head, rubbing one hand across his neck as Clint sniffed loudly.

"Does it ever get better?"

"No, it doesn't," Tony said flatly, his gaze fixed on something beyond the sight of either man with him. "It never gets better. You just grow more accustomed to the feeling."

Both men glanced at the billionaire, sure that there was a story behind his statement, but unwilling to push him into explaining. Tony drained the last of his flask and reached a hand out for the rest of
Clint's bottle. Taking a large swallow of the tequila, Tony grimaced at the taste and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

"His name was Yinsen. I met and forgot him in Switzerland and he saved my life in Afghanistan. And then he died."

"For me" was implied and unspoken.

"So it doesn't matter if it's someone you knew for a few days or someone you knew your whole life. It never gets better."

They sat in silence for a few minutes until Clint took the bottle back from Tony. "Here's to it never getting better," he muttered thickly.

"Tony?" The billionaire groaned, rolling over and burying his face into the pillow. Pepper frowned. "Tony."

He turned his head and cracked one bleary eye. "What?"

"Do you know what month it is?"

Tony paused. "If I say no, are you going to yell at me?"

She sighed, easing herself onto the bed and setting one of the cups of coffee she carried on Tony's bedside table. "No, I won't yell at you. Do you really not know what month it is?"

"This should not surprise you," he said hoarsely, rolling over. "I've been busy."

"Clearly," she murmured. "It's March, and March is when we usually hold the annual benefit."

"Okay," he muttered, reaching over to grasp the coffee on the table. "And?"

"And you've gotten an invitation, like usual, and I think that you should go."

Tony froze, mid-sip. Taking a moment, he swallowed his coffee and turned to her with a raised brow. "Because that ended well last time."

"That is unlikely to be a repeat occurrence," she scolded, ignoring him as he rolled his eyes. "It'll be good for you."

"Why?" His tone was deceptively nonchalant and Pepper sighed.

"Let me clarify. I think it would be good for the team." Her reply garnered his attention, and he shifted to sit up more comfortably, gripping the rim of his coffee cup.

"Again, why?"

She hesitated, glancing down at the cup in her hand. "I think that the team needs some good press," she murmured.

He stared at her for a moment, and then rubbed a hand tiredly across his brow. "Still that bad, huh?"

"Yeah, it's pretty bad," she replied. "Most of the public still holds a high opinion of the Avengers because they think you're cool, but the recovery efforts are still ongoing and that's taking a toll. The insurance companies are dragging their feet, unsurprisingly, and Senators Boynton and Stern are
taking every opportunity to disparage the team. People are starting to forget the good that you've done in the face of the bad."

He raised an eyebrow at her in question, smirking lightly. "So, are you asking my permission to reply to this thing, or are you telling me that we're going?"

"Half and half?" she answered, attempting humor. "I just wanted to warn you before I did anything."

"Appreciated." Tony took a drink to cover his grin. "But you're going to have to tell the others."

"You want us to what?"

Tony smirked at Clint's incredulous question. "The correct term is 'schmooze,' Barton. She wants us to schmooze."

Pepper shot the billionaire a slight glare. "Maria and I feel that it would be a good idea for the team get out of the mansion every once in a while and to get some good press while you're at it. The Maria Stark Foundation has an annual benefit each year, and it's coming up soon."

"She means next week," Tony put in helpfully.

Thor stepped forward, gripping his coffee cup. "I am unfamiliar with this term of 'schmooze.' What is its meaning?"

"It means that we're going to go and make nice with people that claim to be important, but have no bearing on us or our lives," Tony answered. Pepper poked him, frowning with irritation, and he sighed. "We will go to a dinner and there will be plenty of time for small talk to discuss business and to make sure that elected officials and the wealthy still like us."

"I see," Thor nodded, his brow furrowed. "We are to wage a war without physical altercation, using only our charms and wits."

"Exactly," Maria replied. "And it's a good idea, too."

Clint glowered at Maria. "Traitor."

"Because the truth of the matter is that it's almost effortless to sway the public into a negative opinion of the Avengers, if the Avengers aren't out there to defend themselves," she offered, ignoring Clint. "People remember that you saved lives out there, but it's also easy for them to forget that fact and become bitter."

"It's been nearly a year," Bruce pointed out. "Why now? Isn't it just going to look like a ploy?"

Maria nodded. "It is, but that's just part of being heroes. It's the same with any celebrity, don't you think, Pepper?"

"Trust me, Bruce, I have forced Tony into this many times," Pepper assured him. "It will look exactly like a ploy, which is why they're called PR stunts. The detractors will point this out, the public will nod sagely at their computer screens, and promptly ignore it, as long as you all are sufficiently charming."

"Well, we're screwed then," Clint muttered, standing and striding to the refrigerator for a drink, ignoring Maria's disapproving glare.

The liaison turned to Natasha. "More than likely, it will be up to Tony, Steve, and you, Nat."
"I can handle that." Natasha shrugged and looked at Steve. "You going to be okay with this?"

The soldier smiled grimly. "Yes. I think I'll be just fine."

Pepper shot Tony a questioning glance that he waved off. "Well," she began instead. "Then I'll make all the arrangements. We'll need a limo."

She began murmuring logistics to herself and Steve gently interrupted her. "Do you need us for this part?"

"No," she answered slowly, her brow wrinkled. "Why?"

"Because we should probably head out then." At her quizzical gaze, he explained, "Hulk is meeting Maria today."

She swept her eyes across the assembled group. "Why is she the only one in uniform?"

"He's used to everyone else now," Bruce explained. "He practically adores Clint."

"I've got a winning personality," the archer offered helpfully. "I'm so close to getting a Hulk ride."

"I do not want to know what that means," Pepper muttered.

Natasha rolled her eyes at Clint's grin. "It just means that he's going to convince Hulk to let him stand on his shoulders while he walks around. Without throwing him into the mountains, of course."

"I can do it," Clint insisted, and Bruce held his hands up for peace.

"How about we get out to the clearing, and then you can discussing riding privileges with him," the scientist suggested, standing.

Steve rose as well, Thor following. "I think that's an excellent plan, Bruce," Steve said. "Let's go."

"Well, what about me?"

Steve turned back to Pepper, his brow furrowed in question. "You said that you had arrangements to make, right? Aren't you going to do that?"

She bit back on a restrained sigh. "I still think that I should acclimate to the Hulk, too."

Bruce shook his head vehemently. "No."

"What if you hulk out when I'm around?" she asked calmly, clearly having her arguments at the ready. "What if it's the middle of a battle? What if I need his help to get out of there?"

"She makes a good point," Tony offered into Bruce's stony silence. Maria glanced between the trio, curious. "No matter how much you don't agree."

"I am aware," Bruce ground out. He rubbed a hand across his face, obviously ill at ease. The room was quiet for a few moments, allowing him the time he needed to weigh the pros and cons of agreeing and to discuss what he could with Hulk. Finally, he raised his eyes and pointed a finger at Tony. "You wear the suit. You wear the suit and you don't leave her side. This is going to be hard enough."

Tony nodded. "If it makes you happy."
"It does," Bruce confirmed. "I'll go on out there."

"I'll come too," Clint offered. "Maybe I can get him in a good mood."

"He doesn't have good moods," Bruce muttered, shouldering his way outside.

Clint shrugged. "A less smashy mood then."

Thor watched the archer jog to catch up and turned to Natasha. "Would you like to join them as well?"

"It'd probably be best," she murmured, slipping her coat off of the hanger. "Let's go."

Pepper let out a tense sigh as the patio door closed behind them, glancing down at herself. "I should change into something warmer," she muttered absently, moving towards the stairs.

Tony watched her go for a moment, his expression inscrutable. Steve gently nudged him towards the labs. "Go get the suit, Tony. We shouldn't take too long."

The billionaire nodded, heading in the opposite direction as Pepper. Maria let out a long breath. "That was a little more tense than I was expecting."

"Bruce is still not on the best of terms with Hulk, no matter how used to us he is," Steve explained softly. "Tony said it was like a nerd and a jock living in the same dorm room. They're never going to get along, but they both realize that they can't torture each other forever."

"Fitting," she commented. Turning to him, she met his gaze frankly. "What do you think?"

"Honestly?" Steve shrugged. "I think Bruce is still afraid of what Hulk can do. And he'd rather be cautious than regret something."

She hummed an agreement, falling quiet as they waited. Tony appeared in the patio window after a few minutes, touching down in the backyard. Pepper soon dashed down the stairs, bundled in a warm coat and thick boots.

"I'm ready," she said breathlessly, her voice only slightly shaky.

"After you." Steve opened the door and motioned the women through.

They heard Hulk long before they reached him and Pepper hugged her arms closer to her torso as she followed behind Maria. Stepping up to the clearing, they finally realized the reason behind the excessive noise.

Clint was grinning wildly, running full tilt at Hulk and darting between his legs as the jade giant tried to catch him with open hands. Thor was seated at the opposite edge of the clearing with a novel dwarfed in one hand, paying no attention to the game of cat and mouse that Clint was playing with Hulk. Natasha stood at the demi-god's side, her arms crossed in fond exasperation as she watched the proceedings with a sharp eye.

"Oh shit!" Clint dove to the ground to escape a swipe from the left and froze as the fingertips of Hulk's right hand dug into the earth around him, forming a verdant cage.

Hulk huffed lowly and Natasha stiffened, causing Thor to momentarily divert his attention from his book. "Won."

Clint burst into laughter. "Yeah, pal, you won." He rose up onto his elbows and his gaze slid over to
the quartet in the trees. "The others are here now. You remember I said that we had a couple of people for you to meet today, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, good, because they're ready." Clint nodded towards the group, hooking one hand around Hulk's middle finger and levering himself up. "Steve is going to introduce everyone, okay?"

"Kay." Clint slipped from between his fingers and made his way back to Natasha as Hulk brought his hand back to his side.

Steve stepped forward, waving a greeting. "Hi Hulk. How are you?"

The giant grunted, plopping to the ground with a rattling thud that shook the trees. Pepper jumped involuntarily, her eyes wide. Tony flipped the faceplate up.

"You okay?"

"Mmhmm," she managed, the sound slightly strangled. "I'm fine."

He glanced at her dubiously. "Okay."

"Hulk, this is Maria," Steve called, motioning the agent forward. "She's friends with Bruce and she's going to be spending a lot of time with us."

Maria joined Steve at his side, meeting Hulk's gaze fearlessly. The emerald eyes slid from head to toe, the wheels in his large brain turning. He focused on the emblem on her shoulder and his gaze narrowed, a guttural growl emanating from his throat.

"Hulk," Steve began. "She's our friend. Bruce can tell you that."

Thor rose and moved closer to the clash. Clint ran past him, sliding to a stop in front of an unflinching Maria. "Pal. Maria is a friend of mine, too. And Steve's."

The rumble lessened, but did not cease as Clint and Steve began to alternate their calming commentary.

"It's true," Steve agreed. "She is part of the team now."

"She used to be with SHIELD," Clint admitted, undaunted when Hulk snarled in response. "But Natasha and I were too. You know that, and you like us. We're different now. So is Maria."

"She's our friend," Steve insisted, stepping forward and leaving Maria in Clint's protection. The archer adopted his most earnest expression and Maria carefully mimicked him.

The wait seemed endless, but Hulk finally quieted, eventually chuffing in Maria's direction and averting his gaze to the quiet conflict behind the trio.

"You wanted this." Tony's voice echoed suddenly into the silence. "You begged Bruce to come out here and meet the big guy."

"Maybe I was stupid," Pepper retorted, her voice verging on hysterical. Thor crept silently to Pepper's side, keeping a wary eye as Hulk leaned closer to her. "He's enormous. I'm practically a flea to him."

"Pretty."
Pepper let out an involuntary shriek at his proximity, reaching out for Tony. The billionaire let out an incredulous snort, his eyes sparkling. "What did you call her?"

Hulk eyed him passively and pointed one stubby finger at Pepper. "Pretty."

Pepper gaped at him for a moment, blinking rapidly at the offhanded compliment. Very quickly, her eyes narrowed. "Oh, I am so telling Bruce."

"Tony."

Slipping his safety glasses to the top of his head, Tony finally raised his gaze. Pepper was standing in front of him, hands planted firmly on her hips, with Thor quietly behind her. Tony blinked.

"What?"

She huffed. "I have been calling your name for three minutes."

"Whoops," he said unrepentantly. "Did you need something?"

"What are you doing?" Pepper deflected momentarily. "This does not look comprehensible."

"This is going to be the new implantable commlinks I was talking about," he corrected, leaning back and popping his vertebrae.

Pepper rolled her eyes. "I must have tuned you out."

"That's not nice."

"And yet, somehow, occasionally necessary," she murmured fondly. Thor shifted behind her and she turned, understanding the slight look of confusion on his face. "A commlink is like a very small telephone. The team uses it to talk to each other while they're fighting."

Thor nodded. "Am I to receive one as well?"

"Yes," Tony replied. "No special favors for you. Spangles's orders."

"Very well," Thor murmured. "Is there a limitation to the distance we can use them? Such as how the television remote will not operate the television from the front hall."

"That's kind of the same thing, but not really, and no," Tony answered rapidly. "They'll operate like cell phones, to an extent. Why are you asking?"

"I should not wish to be out of contact when I leave," Thor said simply. "For Asgard."

"I don't know that they'll work that far out, but maybe I can make it happen. It'll take time, though," Tony mused. He frowned suddenly at the demi-god, the conversation shifting with the myriad of thoughts in his brain. "What do you even do here? Bruce thinks you're bored by Earth."

"Of course not," Thor replied, his words immediate and easy. "I have conversations with Steve and with Bruce. The assassins are good company, and excellent at sparring. Occasionally, I am able to leave, to visit Jane Foster."

"You leave?"

"For pity's sake," Pepper muttered, rolling her eyes at Tony's surprise. "You're pathetic."
"I am working," Tony stressed. "And Spangles has been bringing me food for most of a month now, so it's not at all strange that I haven't noticed Point Break's disappearing act. This does not surprise you."

She sighed. "Sadly, it really doesn't."

"So who's Jane?" he asked Thor, curious.

"I met Jane Foster when I was exiled to Earth," Thor explained calmly. "She watches the stars."

"She's a hippie?" Tony clarified dubiously.

"She's an astrophysicist," Pepper corrected with exasperation. "She's been sending you emails, asking for your help, since before Midtown."

"That's who that is," he muttered to himself. "What does she want?"

Pepper arched a brow at him as Thor looked on with interest. "Do you think I read your emails?"

"Yes," Tony replied succinctly. "As I recall, that was one of your original duties in the job description."

"And here I thought I'd been upgraded to CEO of Stark Industries from my humble beginnings as your personal assistant," she murmured.

"Details," Tony retorted. Turning to Thor, he waved a hand. "Tell me more."

"Jane Foster has been working to recreate the Bifrost," Thor replied. "Allow me to show you."

The demi-god picked up one of Bruce's papers and flipped it over to the blank back. Taking the pen that Pepper handed him, he quickly inked out the basics of the Bifrost and what he had discussed with Jane.

"What the hell is that?" Tony questioned after a few minutes, when Thor presented him with the page.

"The rainbow bridge between worlds," the demi-god clarified. "It allows us to travel at great speeds through the stars."

Tony stared at him. "Without gear? Or suits or oxygen systems?"

"There is no need for such items," Thor said with some amusement.

Tony scoffed at him. "How is that possible?"

Thor shrugged. "I am not certain. I am simply telling you what I am aware of."

"If this conversation continues, we're going to have to postpone our suit shopping for tomorrow," Pepper interjected, quietly savoring Tony's stunned silence. The billionaire shook himself from his stupor.

"What?" he glanced between Thor and Pepper, his eyes narrowing as he finally noticed her purse and car keys. "You know, if you keep taking Point Break out like this, I may pretend to get jealous."

"Contain yourself," she muttered dryly. "Thor needs a suit for the benefit, so I was taking him into the city to get one until you waylaid him."
"Not my fault."

She rolled her eyes, hitching her purse higher onto her shoulder. "Does Bruce need to come too?"

Tony stared blankly at her for moment and then glanced down at the notes Thor had sketched out for him. "No," he said slowly. "I'm sure he has something acceptable to wear."

Pepper hummed at him. "Well, let me know if he doesn't."

"Sure thing."

"Come on, Thor," she murmured to the demi-god. "You've given him enough to chew on for at least a week. There's plenty of time for us to get you fitted for a suit."

Gently pulling Thor towards the garage, they left Tony immersed in his new work.

The morning of the benefit had finally arrived and Pepper tapped her foot on the tiles, standing at the base of the stairs as she waited for the others to finish dressing themselves for her inspection.

Sighing, she called up to the second floor, "If there's not someone down here in the next five minutes, I am coming up to get you, one by one."

Tony stepped into her line of vision wearing a perfectly tailored tux and an amused smirk. "Do you promise? Should I go back upstairs and wait?"

"Get down here," she threatened. "While I understand that you're usually fashionably late to most of these things, I had hopes for the others."

"That's always dangerous," Natasha murmured, stepping gracefully down the stairs in a stylish evening gown. Clint was at her heels, tugging uncomfortably at the cummerbund of his suit and completely oblivious to the wide-eyed alarm in Pepper's eyes as she stared at him.

"What is that?"

Glancing over at the scandalized look on her face, he peered down at himself and frowned. "My tux. Pepper made an inarticulate noise. "That looks like what the servers wear at the Sheraton restaurant," she said flatly, to Tony's amusement. "And it doesn't fit well. It's too loose in the stomach and too tight in the shoulders and arms. Take it off."

Clint grinned slyly at her, glance sidelong at Natasha. "Why Pepper, Tasha will be so jealous. And I wouldn't want to make Stark look bad, after all. My abs are legendary."

She glared at him, ignoring his teasing. "You can't wear that."

Bruce suddenly joined them, appearing for all the world as an absent-minded professor. Pepper looked in dismay at the dark khaki pants, the tweed jacket and, "Are those elbow pads?"

"Yes." Bruce blinked at her, and then eyed Clint. "What's wrong with what Clint's wearing?"

"Thank you," Clint replied in exasperation, throwing his arms in the air. "What is wrong with what I'm wearing?"

Pepper stepped closer, oblivious to Clint's grievances as she scrutinized his torso. In a lethally quiet voice, she asked, "Is that a bullet hole?"
Clint shrugged, unfazed. "Probably."

"What the hell, Clint?" Pepper looked horrified.

"It's not that bad," he protested, taking a step back. "You can't even see it if I keep my arm down and you aren't looking!"

She glared at him while Natasha snickered at his back. "If you don't have anything else acceptable to wear, then remove that jacket this instant and let me try to salvage it."

Grumbling under his breath, Clint shucked the jacket and handed it moodily to her. Snatching it from him, she turned and caught sight of the hem of Natasha's dove-gray dress. Her finger shook slightly as she pointed in question at the frayed, clearly torn hem. Clint was grimly pleased to see the redhead flinch slightly in the face of Pepper's wrath.

"Clint was shot," she said hastily. "I needed a tourniquet and the dress didn't need a train that badly."

Pepper's eyes snapped to her face. "Was this the same mission?"

"No?" Her brows dropped at the questioning lilt to Natasha's voice.

Whirling on Clint, she asked, "How many times have you **been** shot?"

He wrinkled his nose as he started to absently count the scars aloud. When he reached fourteen, Pepper held up a hand. "Never mind. Forget I asked. Come on, Nat. Let's see what we can do about that dress."

As they hurried upstairs with Clint's jacket, Steve walked down in his dress uniform. "Thank God you look alright," Pepper exclaimed. Seeing the look she shot at him, Clint stuck his tongue out at her. She rolled her eyes and dragged Natasha to the bedrooms. "At least you know how to properly dress yourself."

Steve looked at Tony questioningly. "I feel like I missed something."

Tony snorted a laugh, biting back on a smirk. "You don't know the half of it."

Steve paused, clearly weighing his options. "Is it life threatening?"

"No," Clint replied frankly. Steve shook his head.

"Then I don't care."

"Don't care about what?"

Steve turned to answer Maria and froze as she stepped down the stairs in an elegant navy dress. Tony grinned outright at the soldier's hesitation, leaning forward to nudge the younger man's shoulder. Maria raised an eyebrow in question.

"Whatever had Pepper and Nat going back upstairs," he finally stammered out. "You look lovely."

"Thank you," she said sincerely and diverted her attention to the others. Bruce and Clint were standing aimlessly, watching their interaction, and Tony was eyeing the pair with a knowing smirk. Taking a note of Clint in his shirtsleeves, she asked, "Can I assume it has something to do with why Clint is only half dressed?"

The archer snorted. "She's pissed that there are bullet holes in my jacket."
Maria stared at him incredulously. "Why are there bullet holes in your jacket? You've been down here ten minutes."

"I've used it on a couple of missions," Clint answered, shrugging.

"Jesus, Clint, are you joking?"

He threw his hands out. "What? She said it was a benefit and that we needed suits."

"She said black tie, Barton," Maria shot back, struggling to maintain a stern glower over her exasperated amusement.

Bruce glanced at Tony with some concern. "I didn't hear about that."

The billionaire shrugged. "It is, technically, my benefit, and I don't care what you wear. I'm only wearing this monkey suit because she wouldn't let me wear the Mark Forty-Three."

"I'm shocked," Maria muttered dryly as Thor walked down the stairs.

"Where'd you get the suit, big guy?" Clint eyed the slick silver ensemble the demi-god was wearing. "It's pretty classy."

"I think this is why Pepper was unhappy with our outfits," Bruce whispered, tugging nervously at the cuffs of his sleeves.

Clint scoffed. "My tux is fine."

"Pepper and I purchased the garment at the clothing store," Thor replied to Clint's question, smoothing down the necktie. He frowned, twisting this way and that. "It is more constricting than my armor, which does not bode well for the cloth should the need to fight arise."

"There will be no fighting tonight," Pepper announced firmly as she descended in front of Natasha. The hemline of the latter's dress was now perfect, if now only grazing the floor where it had once dragged. "Not on my watch."

Thor smiled charmingly and extended a hand for hers, brushing a kiss across her knuckles, to Tony's obvious disgust. "I would never dream of dishonoring you so."

"Thank you," she said, her eyes darting nervously across the group in front of her, lingering on Bruce, and then Clint as she handed his jacket back.

Tony watched her dither for a moment, and glanced at Bruce's embarrassed fidgeting. He sighed, drawing attention his way, and motioned to Bruce. "Come on, Banner. I think I've got a suit upstairs that'll fit you."

Pepper relaxed slightly, mouthing a thank you to Tony as he led Bruce up the stairs. Maria took note of the exchange and studied Clint for a moment. "Barton, you too."

"Me too, what?" Clint blinked at Maria, his brows raised in question.

She gestured to the stairs. "Get up there and get a better suit. Stark has plenty, I'm sure there's one that will fit you that doesn't have any bullet holes."

"You want me to put on Tony's clothes?" Clint balked.

"Go." She pointed a finger at the stairs.
Clint glared at her. "No."

"Clinton Francis Barton, get your ass up those stairs right now."

"No."

Maria pursed her lips and stepped forward, wrapping one hand around Clint's bicep in a vise grip and dragging him towards the front door. "You are going up there and find another tux to wear."

Clint narrowed his eyes at her. "I - ,"

"You are not going to finish that sentence because you are going to do as you're told and make yourself presentable. Treat this as a mission."

"Why?" Clint rolled his eyes, crossing his arms. A ripping sound gave them pause, and they both glanced down at the torn seam on his shoulder. "Besides that."

Maria sighed. "Because this is a public relations event and you need to make a good impression."

"I don't give a flying fuck what people think of me," Clint said staunchly.

"Maybe not, but Pepper does," Maria shot back. "And Phil would, if he were here. It isn't just about you, Clint. It's about everyone else, too."

Clint scowled at her, glancing sidelong at the rest of the team, who were watching their exchange with interest. "I am not wearing Stark's pants."

"Fine." Grasping his arm again, she began dragging him towards the stairs.

He huffed at her, glaring at Steve's smirk of amusement. "I can get up there by myself, you know."

"Indulge me," she quipped. "This way I'll know that you actually changed your jacket. And we can get rid of that eighth grade cummerbund around your waist."

Natasha burst into laughter as Maria manhandled him up the stairs. Clint turned around to glare lightly at her, stepping onto the landing. "Dude, let go."

"No." She shoved him a little harder down the hallway. "I have to make you look presentable, since you can't seem to do it yourself."

"You still sound like a mom," he muttered.

"Zip it, Barton." Tony and Bruce looked up curiously at their entrance, the latter holding a jet black tuxedo. Maria smiled thinly. "Clint here needs a nice jacket and a new shirt, Stark. Mind if I raid your closet?"

"It's all yours." Tony nodded at the open doors as Bruce stepped into the bathroom to change.

Maria left Clint's side to rifle through the suits, tossing him one of the white shirts that hung next to the jackets. He gripped the collar of his shirt and pulled his over his head, taking the cummerbund with it. Sliding his arms through the sleeves, Clint buttoned the new shirt up as Maria glanced over her shoulder at him. Mentally scrutinizing the shade of his pants, she turned back to the closet and hummed. Clint watched her inspect a few coats, finally slipping three of them off of the hangers and holding them out to him.

"Try these."
Clint opened his mouth to protest, but closed it at her quelling glance. Grumbling quietly to himself and ignoring Tony's snort of laughter, he dropped two of the jackets on the bed and pulled the third one on. Holding his arms out, he spun on the spot.

"Can I go now?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Not that one."

"Maria," he whined. "Come on."

She shot him a damming glare. "Change."

He scoffed, but shucked the first coat and picked up the second. Tony raised an eyebrow at the pair. "I had no idea that you were so easily cowed, Barton. I'm almost ashamed."

"Shut up, Stark." Clint tugged on the other jacket, yanking at the lapels. Bruce emerged from the bathroom, glancing hesitantly into the room.

Maria gave him a once over and nodded approvingly. "That's much better than the tweed," she murmured. "Very nice, Bruce."

The scientist smiled, somewhat shyly. "Thanks. Let's hope Pepper agrees."

"She will," Tony put in. "I'll tell her to."

"Like that will work," Clint mumbled as the two scientists left the room. "Is this one fine?"

Maria cocked her head at him and walked over, pulling the hem of the jacket down. "I think it'll work. Make sure Pepper is okay with it."

He frowned at her. "I still say it shouldn't matter."

She sighed at him. "Clint, you know that this is a delicate situation and that impressions are everything. And while, admittedly, I think that it is all a load of shit, it means something to Pepper."

"That's cheating," he complained. "Are you taking lessons from Steve?"

She smirked at him. "Of course not. He could take lesson from me, you know that. Now, come on. Let's go show Pepper."

Nudging him towards the doors, she followed him downstairs. Once Clint joined them, looking somewhat surly, the group fell into a disordered line. Pepper cast a critical eye over her charges. Heaving a tiny sigh, she motioned them towards the front door. "Let's get this over with."

Herding them outside, they piled into the waiting limousine and sat back to enjoy the two and a half hour ride to the Natural History Museum.

"Why are we visiting a museum if we are to attend this gala?" Thor asked as the limo crunched down the drive.

"The benefit is held at the museum so that those who are bored have something to look at," Tony informed him, reaching into the side console for a bottle of scotch. Pepper watched him pour a glass with astonishment that quickly faded into irritation.

"Remember," Pepper admonished, taking Tony's glass from his hands with a glare and chucking the contents out of the window. "No drinks until we've been there for at least an hour. You need to be
sober for the pictures."

Tony made a face at her. "I hate pictures."

"I don't care," she replied sternly. Clint choked on a snicker. "You know the rules."

"Rules are made to be broken," Tony reminded her lightly.

She smirked at him. "And couches are made to be slept on. Alone."

"That's fighting dirty," he informed her. "Not okay."

"I'll make a note," she said dryly.

To be continued in Chapter Eleven.
Chapter Eleven

"You must remember, family is often born of blood, but it doesn’t depend on blood. Nor is it exclusive of friendship. Family members can be your best friends, you know. And best friends, whether or not they are related to you, can be your family."

— Trenton Lee Stewart, The Mysterious Benedict Society

... 

"The most important thing in life is your family. There are days you love them, and others you don’t, but in the end they’re the people you always come home to. Sometimes it’s the family you’re born into, and sometimes it’s the one you make for yourself."

— Candice Bergen, Sex and the City

Chapter Eleven

Maria watched from the sidelines as the photographers strategically placed the team for their official pictures. Pepper was hovering nearby, murmuring soft instructions to the Avengers as they were forcibly nudged into position. Tony was naturally in his element, and Steve took to the media surprisingly well, calling upon his days in the USO to help. Natasha was serenely calm, holding the perfect Mona Lisa smile, and Clint was unreadable, as always. Bruce was visibly nervous, but he was handling it like a champ, and Thor seemed oddly amused by the entire proceedings.

They were finally released by the press and they scattered. Tony beelined for the bar, to no one’s surprise, and Clint followed him, tugging at his tie. Pepper and Natasha herded Thor and Bruce towards Maria, abandoning Steve to the small hoard of admirers that were waiting for him.

"Well, that was slightly less unpleasant than I’d expected," Bruce said dryly, flashing a small smile at Pepper. She grinned back as Tony returned, sipping heavily at his ever-present scotch. Clint was empty-handed, grumbling beneath his breath. Natasha glanced questioningly at him.

"They don’t even have beer at these fucking things," he groused. She smirked, leaning into him.

"We’ll sneak you some in next time."

Raising a brow leeringly at her, the archer eyed her curve-hugging dress. "Oh yeah. Where?"

She laughed softly, ignoring his question as Steve rejoined them, tugging at the hem of his jacket. "Vultures," he gasped. "They’re like vultures."

Tony hummed sympathetically. "You need a drink," he decreed. Holding up his empty glass, he gave it a shake for emphasis, rattling the remaining ice cubes. "And so do I."

"I can’t get drunk, Tony," Steve admonished. Bruce turned to him suddenly, curious, but Tony cut in.

"That’s fine," the billionaire assured Steve, leading him to the bar. "More for me."

"That can’t end well," Natasha murmured, watching them walk away.
Maria snorted a laugh. "Do you want to go save Steve? Because I don't."

"How uncharitable of you," Clint muttered, yanking at his tie again.

Maria shrugged. "Self preservation. Stop picking at your tie. You're like a child."

"There is a reason why Nat has to go to these damn things and I camp out on a roof," he muttered.

Maria smirked. "It's because she looks better in a dress."

The museum was filled with idle chatter, the soft drone crescendoing as it echoed off the marble interior. True to their word, Steve, Natasha, and Tony made the rounds, mingling and making small talk with the attendees for most of the night. A quartet was set up in a corner, playing orchestral music. Some of the older couples began drifting towards the center, forming a makeshift dance floor. The quartet leader nodded at the rest and the song shifted accordingly into a simple waltz, giving the couples a tune to dance to.

Steve glanced across the room at Pepper, who had started subtly swaying to the music, and nudged Tony.

"Hm?" Tony took another sip of his scotch and Steve shook his head.

"Pepper looks like she wants to dance," he whispered.

Tony followed his gaze and shrugged. "Someone will ask her," he said confidently. "They always do."

Steve raised his brows questioningly at Tony. "You don't dance with her?"

"I don't dance, ever," Tony replied, lifting the glass to his lips again before amending his statement. "Well, at least, not sober."

Steve turned his gaze to Pepper again. Tony lifted a brow at the action, then rolled his eyes and shoved the soldier a little. "She's all yours, Cap. Make it count."

Lightly shoving Tony back, Steve ignored the smirk on the older man's face and made his way over to Pepper. She smiled at him as he approached, holding out a hand that shook slightly. "May I have this dance?"

"Of course." Leading her out onto the dance floor, Steve gave her a little twirl and she laughed, the sound surprised. "I heard somewhere that you didn't know how to dance."

Steve grinned at her. "Tony showed me how to Google things. I taught myself."

"That's wonderful, Steve," she said feelingly as she returned his charming smile.

Flashbulbs glittered to their left, the photographers unwilling to pass up the opportunity of capturing the moment on film. Steve led Pepper in a few graceful turns around the room, escorting her to Tony's side at the end of the dance.

The billionaire raised an eyebrow at the smile on Pepper's face when she thanked Steve for the dance. "Do I need to be worried?"

"That Steve is a perfect gentleman and treats me like a princess?" she queried, smiling teasingly at him. "Not at all."
He shot her a mock glare and pointed a finger at Steve. "Hands off my Pep, Cap. Go dance with your own woman."

"Tony." Steve's ears darkened. "Be quiet."

"Maria did say that she enjoys dancing," Pepper offered leadingly. "And you can dance with Nat so that it doesn't look suspicious, if you like."

"I'm not worried about looking suspicious," Steve ground out, looking painfully embarrassed.

"Then go ask her to dance," Pepper said. "At least save her from Clint. He looks furious about something."

"That's just his face," Tony told her, resting one palm subtly against the small of her back. He smiled at her when she rolled her eyes in his direction. Turning to Steve, who was surreptitiously eyeing the pair across the room, Tony poked him. "You're not going to get a better chance than this. Go."

Steve glared at the billionaire, but moved in Maria's direction nonetheless, to Tony's clear satisfaction. The only sign that he was the least bit nervous was the slight red tint to his ears as he spoke softly to the agent. Clint's brows shot into his hairline at the request, but he sipped at the drink in his hand rather than say anything. Hesitantly, Steve led Maria out to the dance floor and Pepper eyed the scotch in Tony's hand.

"What number is this?" she asked quietly, tapping a fingernail against the glass.

Tony inspected the alcohol and mentally tallied his drinks. "Three?"

"Good. Then you're sufficiently drunk to dance with me." He groaned aloud and she narrowed her eyes. "Tony."

"Fine. But I get to keep my scotch," he bargained.

"Down the rest of it and get a new one when we're done," she offered, taking one step towards the floor and holding out her hand entreatingly. Scowling halfheartedly, he did as she asked and led her among the other couples.

Glancing out among the crowd, Pepper noted that Bruce had taken refuge at Clint's side, while Natasha was continuing to work the room with a guileless smile. Thor was on the opposite side of the dance floor, boisterously entertaining a small swarm of people.

"Now, what out there is more interesting than me?"

She rolled her eyes, smiling fondly at Tony. "Would you like the list alphabetically or categorically?"

"Ouch. I think that hurt, Potts." He looked innocently at her. "I think you're going to have to do something about that later. Or right now. I'm sure we could sneak away."

"Absolutely not," she said firmly.

"You're no fun," he complained.

She snorted at him. "Besides the fact that it's horribly unprofessional, do you really want to leave Clint and Natasha in here unattended?"

"Spangles can handle them. He's good at assassin duty."
"No."

He sighed. "You're missing out."

She leaned forward, resting her forehead on his shoulder as she chuckled helplessly. The song melted into the next and they continued dancing until Clint appeared at Tony's shoulder.

"Maria thinks that getting us all dancing with everyone is a perfect photo op," he mumbled by way of greeting. "I'm cutting in. Go find Maria or Nat or something."

"Scotch," Tony said succinctly. "Just remember that she comes home with me."

"We all go home with him," Clint grumbled, effortlessly moving Pepper into the circle of dancers. "And I'm fucking married."

Pepper snorted a laugh, burying her head in her own shoulder. "Did Maria really say that, or are you just trying to annoy Tony?"

"It is a perk," Clint admitted. "But she did say it. I think she's directing the press right now."

Pepper hummed softly, focusing her attention on picking out her charges in the crowd. Thor remained in the corner with his entourage and Tony was, unsurprisingly, at the bar. Maria had slipped out of sight, but Pepper noticed Natasha coercing Bruce onto the dance floor.

Clint followed her gaze and whistled lowly. "I think I'm impressed."

"That she asked him to dance?"

Clint shook his head, grinning lightly. "That he agreed to go."

Steve smiled as Natasha coaxed Bruce onto the dance floor. They moved effortlessly together, the assassin adapting perfectly to Bruce's clumsy start. The sight of them was slightly glaring, Bruce visibly counting his steps and Natasha with unhesitant and polished motions, but Steve had to admit that they worked strangely well together. He was sure there was a metaphor for the Avengers in there somewhere, but he wasn't going to go looking for it.

There was movement in the corner of his eye, and he turned. One of the senators that littered the room was approaching him, something of a shark-toothed grin on his oddly familiar face as he extended his hand.

"It is an honor, Captain Rogers." It sounded like anything but. Steve stiffened his spine, trying not to flinch at the silky smooth voice in his ear as he shook the senator's hand. "I'm Senator Boynton, New Hampshire."

"Pleased to meet you, sir," Steve replied as he firmly shook the proffered hand.

"Well, Captain," Senator Boynton began, subtly flexing his fingers. "The military has had a tough time of it cleaning up Midtown, don't you agree?"

Steve suppressed a frown. "From what I've heard, Senator Boynton, the troops have been doing just fine."

"Oh." The senator's smile gleamed just a little more and Steve had the feeling that he'd just stepped right into a trap. "I was unaware that you were helping them."
Steve mentally groaned. "I am not currently helping with the clean-up efforts," he said carefully. He watched as the senator latched on to his words, chewed them over, and attacked. "Then how would you know how they are doing with the clean-up?"

"I keep up with current events," Steve replied firmly. Tony finally returned from his fourth trip to the bar and wandered up to the conversation, his hand curled loosely around another tumbler of scotch.

"From your lair, where you've been hiding out these last few months?" The senator's sleek voice hardened, despite the fact that his smile never faltered. "A bit cowardly, don't you think?"

Tony's eyes narrowed. Steve held out a palm to hold him back, but it was furiously batted away with a glare. "Cowardly?" Tony turned his glower on the senator. "Cowardly, to take a hard earned rest and let someone else handle the clean up?"

"Cowardly, to disappear from the face of the planet, to ignore the mess that was made and to refuse to be held accountable for the destruction cause by his, and your, actions," Senator Boynton corrected gently, his lips twitching with the effort to remain appearing pleasant.

Tony spoke before Steve had the chance to even think of a reply. "It seems you've forgotten about the aliens. A lovely little race called the Chitauri?" Tony sipped at his drink. "Much like Han Solo, they shot first."

"That doesn't change the fact that the Avengers helped to decimate Midtown and have done nothing to repair the damages."

There was a sudden, deliberate change in Tony's demeanor, and Steve braced himself. Over Tony's head, he nodded at Clint, who left Pepper with Bruce and started making his way over to them. Pepper looked worried, but remained with the scientist at Steve's wordless instruction.

"I'm sorry," Tony said icily, and Steve tuned back in to the conversation at hand. "I was unaware that we were supposed to be concentrating on keeping track of collateral damage while repelling an alien invasion."

The Senator glared at Tony, dropping his attempt at civility. "The fact of the matter is, Mister Stark, that the Avengers were directly responsible for over one hundred and sixty billion dollars worth of damages to the city of New York and they have done nothing to repay that."

"Put it on my tab," Tony replied flippantly, eyes cold. Clint laid a gentle hand on his arm.

"Careful, Senator," Tony warned as Clint applied the barest hint of pressure to his hold.

"Or what? You'll ruin me?" the senator sneered quietly. "I have friends in high places, Mister Stark, just like you."

"Friends can be bought," Tony said, leaning in close and ignoring when Steve's hand mirrored Clint's on his other arm. "And I've got a whole lot of money."

He was grimly pleased to see Boynton pale involuntarily as he turned, finally allowing Steve to lead him away from the confrontation, Clint a solid presence at his side.

"Going to lecture me on my bad behavior, Captain?" He kept his eyes forward, but pitched his voice
to direct the question at Steve as he downed the remainder of his scotch and gave the glass to a passing waiter.

"Nope," Steve replied quickly. Tony glanced up at him and was surprised to see the hint of a smile playing at his lips. "I'm actually kind of proud."

Tony ignored the sudden lightness in his head, silently attributing it to the alcohol. Spying Pepper looking worried at Bruce's side, he sighed. "We're not going to talk about this. Ever."

"You got it, Iron Ass," Clint replied with a grin.

"Tony, what happened?" Pepper's hands fluttered slightly before she crossed them nervously. "I saw you talking to Senator Boynton and you looked so upset, but I couldn't get there with all the people."

"Miss Potts," was all Tony said, and Pepper quieted. Glancing at the rest of them, he continued, "I've had my fill of parties for a while. Anyone else agree?"

"Completely," Steve agreed succinctly. "Let's go home."

Rounding up the rest of the team and extricating Thor from a gaggle of cougars, Steve led everyone back to the limo. They piled in, one after the other, and Tony rapped on the window to indicate to the driver that they were ready to leave.

"I don't know about you guys," Maria murmured, slipping her heels off and curling her toes into the carpet. "But I could use a drink."

"I fucking second that," Clint muttered. "Where's the nearest bar?"

"We are not going to the nearest bar," Tony said. "We are going to Rudy's, because Rudy's is better."

"You just want to piss off that bartender again," Clint retorted. "And I'm fine with that, because he's an ass."

"Alright then." Pepper knocked her knuckle against the glass, informing the driver of the detour with resignation. "Let's go."

The patrons of Rudy's watched with thinly disguised interest as the limo pulled into the parking lot and took up four spaces across from the bar. The team tumbled out of the back and into the bar, looking terribly out of place in their finery. Mark the Bartender glanced over at them and rolled his eyes at the sight of both Tony and Clint, who grinned unrepentantly at him in return.

Pepper sighed at the two men as Clint walked up to the bar and began ordering, Natasha at his side. "I'll find us a table."

"I'll come with you," Maria said, falling into step with her.

"Come on, Cap," Tony said, slapping a hand on Steve's back. "I am buying you a drink."

Steve sighed softly, throwing the billionaire an exasperated glance. "For the last time, Tony, I can't get drunk." His eyes were suddenly distant. "Believe me, I've tried."

Bruce shouldered his way past Thor. "I still don't quite understand that," he ventured as they trailed Pepper and Maria to a table near the stage.
"Metabolic rate," Steve reminded him, waving at Natasha, who was carrying the first round of drinks.

Bruce shook his head, accepting a beer from Natasha and sliding into a chair beside the soldier. "That makes perfect sense," he muttered. "Why didn't I think of it?"

"Because you are far too sober for this type of conversation," Clint answered, bringing a tray of vodka shots to the table. He ignored Bruce's quiet, "I didn't think that was how that worked," and held a shot glass up. "Cheers."

Steve hesitantly picked one up between two fingers and toasted a grinning Natasha. Tony eyed him contemplatively as Steve knocked his shot back, grimacing at the taste. Feeling the weight of his gaze, Steve glanced over at the billionaire, momentarily flicking his eyes to where Bruce was explaining the nuances of shots to Thor.

"What?"

Tony grinned roguishly. "Let's have a drinking contest."

"No." Steve's response was immediate. "I'm not going to get on Pepper's bad side by putting you in the hospital for alcohol poisoning."

"Thank you," Pepper murmured feelingly, downing her shot with prowess, to Thor's slight surprise. "Well, see, that's the thing," Tony continued, ignoring Pepper and nudging his vodka towards Natasha. "I don't really believe your whole 'can't get drunk thing'."

Steve raised one brow at him sardonically. "So you'd like to test my so-called theory?"

"Exactly!"

"It's not my theory," Steve replied, sounding slightly frustrated. "I promise, I've tried to get drunk."

Clint cocked his head in question, pausing in his quest to pick out all of the peanuts from the bowl on the table. "When?"

"I don't want to talk about it," the soldier murmured after a moment's pause, acutely aware of Maria's eyes on him.

Tony slammed a hand down on the table. "Then it didn't happen. Barkeep! We need a round of tequila and the bottle."

"No one talks like that anymore, Tony," Natasha scolded, picking up his shot and downing it. "And you're not making poor Steve drink that swill. At least get him something classier."

Tony snorted as she rose from her seat. "Like vodka?"

Natasha leaned across Bruce's place, forcing him to straighten in his chair, her eyes flashing. "Are you insulting the drink of my heritage?"

"Are you going to be pissed if I say yes?" Tony hedged.

"Yes."

"Then no."
She pushed up from the table, her smile slightly sharp. "Good."

Tony let his breath out in a whoosh as she stalked to the bar. "She was so much nicer when she was undercover."

"I like her better under the covers too," Clint said with a wink, reaching for the last shot.

The night wore on and the level of exuberance dropped with each passing hour. Tony and Clint hauled Steve to another table and began their contest, gradually pulling most of the local populace in. Thor observed for a while and stepped in to challenge Steve at one point, until Natasha and Pepper had to drag him away when they both reached twenty shots with no outward effects. Tony and Clint stepped in to fill Thor's place, and Pepper simply asked that they not poison themselves.

The trio joined Bruce and Maria at the table and conversed comfortably together. Pepper was the first to drop, the stress of the last few days having exhausted her sufficiently enough to rest her head to Bruce's shoulder and drift off. Natasha fell quiet next, choosing instead to keep an eye on the contest at the other end of the bar. Maria left the conversation after Natasha, simply because Bruce and Thor had begun discussing the bare basics of the Bifrost. The dialogue tapered off into a few minutes of silence, until Bruce commented into the quiet.

"I can't remember the last time I closed out a bar."

Thor looked curiously at him. "Close out?"

Bruce gestured towards the clock on the wall. "It's nearly two, which is when the bars close for the night. Closing a bar out means that you've stayed until they turn the lights on and kick you out."

"It's not literal kicking, Thor," Maria interjected, noting the demi-god's raised brow. "They just tell us it's time to go."

"Promise?" Pepper groaned, finally lifting her head from Bruce's shoulder.

Maria smirked at her. "I'd have thought that you'd be used to late nights with Stark."

Pepper shot her a glare, its intensity lessened by the large yawn that followed. "I've been running on Tony amounts of sleep for the last few days, getting ready for the benefit. My caffeine and adrenaline are finally wearing off."

Bruce opened his mouth to comment, but was interrupted by a loud cry from the other end of the bar. Steve slammed another shot glass on the table, tiredly taking the breathalyzer from Clint and showing the minimal readings to the small crowd that had gathered. Money changed hands and Tony served up another shot with a wild grin.

Bruce glanced at the others. "Should we go save him?"

There were murmurs of agreement from Natasha and Pepper, although both continued to block him from actually going to Steve's aid. Thor watched the proceedings with amusement and deferred to Maria. "I think that you should attempt to extricate our good Captain."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Why me?"

"You will be gentler in your retrieval efforts," Thor replied smoothly. "I believe that I would have to physically escort him from the swarm."
Maria sighed softly. "You do have a point," she acquiesced, rising. "I think it's time we all head back anyway."

Slipping out of the booth, she made her way towards the congregation around Steve and pointedly ignored Natasha's whispered, "Nicely played, Thor."

Striding over to Steve's side, he looked up at her approach with barely restrained relief. Clint rolled his eyes and whispered loudly to Tony, "Game's up, man."

The billionaire looked up from pouring yet another shot to glare at her. "We're not done."

"Oh yes you are," Mark called from behind the bar. He flipped on the lights and cut the music off. "Last call. Close your tabs and get the hell out of my bar."

"I'll handle it," Pepper murmured, stepping up to the counter with one of Tony's credit cards. Thor stood menacingly at her right to glare at the crush of men that approached to pay as well. Natasha stumbled slightly at Bruce's side and rested one hand on his shoulder for balance as she peeled her shoes from her feet. The scientist offered her an arm for support and gave the other to Pepper, leading them both out to the limo.

Steve started to bustle Clint and Tony outside as well when Clint shouted, "Pay up, guys!"

A line formed in front of the pair and men began paying their tabs to the billionaire-turned-bookie. Maria snorted a laugh and Steve simply rolled his eyes, leaning back against the wall to wait.

"Would've killed a normal man," one of the locals mumbled as he handed Tony a wad of cash.

Tony grinned sloppily at him. "He's not a normal man. He's StarkTech."

"And that shit was built to last," Clint finished, dissolving into laughter.

Exasperated, Steve called out, "Thor, do you mind?"

The demi-god turned from the door and made his way to Steve's side. "Mind what?"

The soldier hauled Clint up from the bench, ignoring his protests. "Help Clint out to the car."

"Clint can walk his own ass out to the car," the archer informed him with a slight slur.

"And break his own face on the way," Maria quipped. "I haven't seen you this drunk since Phil dragged you in from that dive in Oklahoma."

"I still say he cheated," Clint muttered as Thor hooked him around the waist and, none-too-gently, lugged him towards the front door.

Steve raised a brow at Maria, leaving Tony to collect the last of their winnings and try to stuff them into his wallet. "Is there a story there?"

"Definitely," she agreed, watching Tony rise to his feet with interest. "But I think it'll have to wait till tomorrow."

"Of course," Steve agreed immediately, moving to wrap an arm around Tony as the billionaire swayed on the spot. "Let's go home."

"Haven't been this drunk in a while," Tony mumbled, leaning heavily on Steve as they traipsed out to the limo.
"I tried to warn you," Steve murmured as Maria opened the door and he bundled Tony into the back. "You should have listened. Then you wouldn't have spent so much money."

Tony snorted, arms flailing for purchase as he tumbled into Clint's lap. "S'fine, Cap," he insisted, his words slurring slightly. "We took bets and I put everything on you."

Clint grinned at him from the corner of the backseat. "Double or nothing."

"We won the bar tab twice over!"

"Because you need more money," Maria murmured beneath her breath, crawling into the backseat. Shaking his head, Steve merely suppressed a grin and followed.

"Making you the team cook was the best plan ever," Clint mumbled, reaching for another heaping spoonful of macaroni and cheese. "Whose idea was it?"

"I think it was mine," Tony said, swallowing his last bite of food. "Definitely mine."

Natasha rolled her eyes. "Clearly."

"I have an announcement," Thor offered quickly, in an attempt to prevent the coming argument as Tony's gaze narrowed on the redhead. "The training rooms have been finished, with some assistance from Steve and Barton. We are now able to spar in the comfort of the indoors."

"Finally," Tony muttered into his glass.

"It was just Clint, Thor, and me." Steve glared lightly at him. "You could have helped, if you'd wanted them to be finished faster."

"I pay for buildings to be built," Tony reminded him, leaning back and pushing his empty plate away. "I don't actually do the work. That's why we have you."

Clint snorted a laugh, pressing his face into his shoulder to stifle the noise. Steve's eyes narrowed further. "And here I thought I was just a short-order cook."

"Don't sell yourself short."

Steve pinched the bridge of his nose and Natasha shifted in her seat. "So, when does training start?"

"What?" Tony perked up at her question, glancing alertly from person to person.

Steve ignored him, thinking for a moment. "The last shipment of equipment won't come in till next week, but the building itself is finished and we've got all of the mats down. We could start tomorrow, if you really wanted."

"Is this a part of the team thing or a whole team thing?" Bruce asked quietly, pushing the last of his peas into a pile.

Steve sighed softly, leaning slightly forward. "This is a whole team thing," he said finally.

Tony cursed lowly and glared at Steve.

The soldier held out his hands helplessly. "I just think it's a good idea for everyone to have a basic background in hand to hand. Extra training never hurt anyone."
"What if I tear something?" Tony shot back. "Or Red finally breaks my arm? That would hurt."

"I'm going to break your jaw in a minute," Natasha muttered beneath her breath. Raising her voice slightly, she asked, "Are we going to have to call Pepper so that she can tell you to do it?"

Tony whirled around and glared at her. "No. Because I've had hand to hand. With Happy."

"Let's recall just how well he fights, shall we?" she purred, smirking at him.

"That does not count," Tony said staunchly. "You attacked him."

"We were sparring," she reminded him dryly. "At your insistence. And his."

"I'm calling Pepper," Maria interjected, reaching into her pocket.

Steve's hand shot out, his fingers quickly pressing against her arm to halt her movements before returning to his side. "Tony."

Tony glanced at Steve's implacable face and frowned. He stared at the ground for a moment, clearly debating his decision, and finally huffed with irritation. "Fine. But I refuse to fight with Red. She's malicious."

"Fair enough," Steve agreed, turning at Natasha's overly dramatic gasp of shock. He rolled his eyes at her. "Don't deny it. The last time you two sparred, he spent more time with his face in the mat than actually learning new techniques."

"He wouldn't spend so much time on the mat if he were a better fighter," Natasha mumbled. "Give him Clint then, if he's going to complain."

"Actually," Bruce spoke up, his tone slightly nervous. He adjusted his glasses when the others gave him their attention. "I'd prefer to work with Clint, if that's alright."

"It's nice to know I terrify you," Natasha commented lightly, smirking at Steve when he dropped his head into his hands.

Bruce glared at her. "That's not it. It's just that Hulk likes Clint, so he may be less inclined to make an appearance if he thinks Clint would get hurt."

"I feel so loved."

"Quiet." Silence fell at Steve's command. He raised his head. "Clint spars with Bruce. Nat takes turns with me and Thor. Tony works with Maria."

"What?" Steve glared at the billionaire, who was staring at him in abject horror. "She'll kill me and tell you it was an accident. It will not be an accident."

"Not at this rate," Maria muttered beneath her breath.

Steve crossed his arms and fixed Tony with a stern stare. "I will watch your matches, if that's what it takes, but this is going to happen, whether you like it or not. It's for your benefit."

"Doesn't seem like it," Tony shot back, a hint of true anger in his tone.

Steve breathed deeply, trying to calm himself. "How many times have you been caught without the suit?"
"That is not -,"

"It is important," Steve insisted. "I know that you've had some training and I understand that you think it's enough, but it isn't. You need to work with someone that is actually better than you at this and who knows how an attacker is going to think. And who has the patience to actually teach you. That is Maria."

Tony scowled blackly at the soldier, oblivious to the disbelieving looks that were being given between the rest of the team. "You'll call Pepper, won't you?" he asked flatly, after a few moments.

Steve shrugged. "If I need to. She'll agree with me, of course. But I'd rather not have to involve her."

"Because you don't want to give her the authority?"

"Because I don't think I need to," Steve replied simply.

Tony matched his harsh gaze and the team found themselves holding their breath as he silently debated with himself. Long minutes passed where both billionaire and soldier stood their ground, until Tony ultimately relaxed his stance.

"If I end up with anything worse than bruises covering thirty percent of my body, we're switching and I get Clint."

"Fine," Steve agreed.

"If I may be so bold," Thor asked Steve tentatively, after a few moments of edgy silence. "What shall you and I be learning?"

"Agility," Natasha informed him firmly, before Steve could speak. "The two of you have brute strength, and that's usually effective, but you can have more subtlety than a crashing freight train when you fight. I promise it's possible."

Clint burst into laughter at the incredulous look on Thor's face as Steve hastened to defend Natasha's observation. "It might be helpful. We've talked about learning your own strength on Earth, and sometimes it's better to land a softer punch in a weak area than it is to sock someone in the jaw as hard as you can."

Thor narrowed his eyes at Steve. "The end effect is still the same, is it not?"

Steve floundered for a moment, his mouth hanging open, and Natasha took over. "While that may be true in some cases, it isn't always. The less damage we can cause to the surroundings, the better. That means hitting someone with enough force to knock them out, but not through a wall."

"I see your meaning," Thor said finally, his tone clearly grudging. "I shall attempt it, if you request."

"I do," Steve confirmed. "We'll start the day after tomorrow, eight o'clock sharp."

"I don't do mornings," Tony put in. "So that's not going to work for me."

Steve glared at him. "Eight o'clock sharp. And that's an order."

Tony scowled, but didn't protest further.

The stack of papers was shorter than Maria had feared, but too tall to be dealing with in the wee hours of the morning. Director Fury had called and been more displeased than usual at her lack of
communication with headquarters. She’d stepped out of the room and away from prying ears to argue with him, but she’d ultimately been given the order to finish the paperwork that he’d decided her new position required.

It was a petty punishment for leaving the way that she had, and she knew it, but there hadn’t been much of an option. Additionally, if she completed the task, he’d have less to be irritated with. Doing so at two-thirty in the morning, however, was not her brightest idea.

Maria groaned lightly, debating the merits of simply going to bed as she dropped her head into her palms and ran a hand through her hair. Sighing, she picked up the glass at her right and took a sip, savoring the smooth burn of the alcohol.

"Please." Stark’s voice sliced through the dark lounge and she turned suddenly, peering into the shadows. He stepped into the light of the kitchen, glaring at her sardonically. "Make yourself at home."

She glanced down at her casual outfit of sweatpants and a long sleeved shirt, shrugging. "I did."

"Clearly. Just stay away from my scotch."

"I did," she reiterated. He stared at her for a moment and she slid her flask into view from behind her pile of papers. "I brought my own."

He grunted at her, stepping closer. She remained motionless as he picked her glass up with two fingers and sniffed appreciatively at the golden liquid inside. His brows inched upwards of their own accord.

"Doesn't smell awful."

"Because it's not," she retorted. Picking up the flask, she held it out to him. "Care to try some?"

"Why not?" Plucking a coffee mug from the cabinet, he poured a splash from the flask and sampled it. "This is, actually, surprisingly good."

She smirked lightly at him. "Might have more in common than you'd thought, huh?"

"I wasn't the only one thinking that way," he pointed out. "You judged me."

"I judge everyone," she replied easily. "It's part of my job description."

He snorted, taking a seat at the opposite end of the table. "Is admitting when you're wrong also part of your job description?"

"Yes." She bit back a smirk as he clearly waited for her to continue speaking, and mentally counted to one hundred. At fifty seven, the muscles in his face shifted and she continued before he could comment. "I will if you will."

Tony fixed her with a look. "I am never wrong."

"Ever?" she quipped.

"No." He straightened, polishing off his drink. "I can see how you might think that, though. Common misconception."

"I see," she murmured, amused despite herself. "My mistake."
"Of course it was," he agreed easily. Leaning forward, he tipped his mug towards her. "Scotch?"

There was a moment of pause, where she recognized that, in his own way, Tony was offering an olive branch. She picked up her flask and casually unscrewed the lid, pointedly ignoring his small grin as she poured the remainder in his mug.

He raised a brow as she set the empty container on the table. "Giving me the last of your stash? I'm flattered."

"Don't be," she said wryly. "I brought two handles with me."

"Are you planning to share your black market goods?"

She smiled slowly. "Are you admitting that my scotch is better than yours?"

"No." He averted his gaze, reluctantly continuing. "But it doesn't taste terrible and I occasionally like something new."

"So, you're saying that you were wrong?" He stared at her and her smile shifted into a smirk. "It sounded like you were saying that you were wrong."

He thought for a moment and barked a laugh as she held up her glass for a toast. After a split second of hesitation, he gave in, clinking his mug with hers.

Steve, to Thor and Clint's dismay, had not taken the time to fix his standard breakfast fare and opted for a more simple meal of fruit and toast, promising a large lunch when they returned from training. After everyone had eaten their fill and the coffee pot had been emptied, they collectively made their way out to the training rooms.

The structure was located behind the main house, set back against the treeline, and fashioned of the same masonry and architecture as the mansion, causing it to appear as if it had always been there.

The inside of the first room was gleaming, impact mats covering the floor and the lower parts of the walls. A set of six weights lined the mirrored wall to the west and a range of weight machines and treadmills stood on the opposite side of the room. The second held a large boxing ring and a space at its side large enough for a second pair to be sparring, with room leftover.

Thor held his arms out, turning to the others with a grin. "Shall we begin?"

"Can you wait?" Bruce shifted nervously, adjusting his glasses and gesturing sheepishly. "I just -. I'd rather you be prepared and have the time to get out if something goes wrong."

Clint rolled his eyes in mild exasperation, but any comment was quelled by Steve's sharp gaze. "Of course," the soldier assured him. "We'll just step back over here."

"By the door," Bruce clarified.

Steve shrugged. "If that's what you want."

Clint stepped forward as the others drifted back towards the exit. "Alright, first we're going to see what you can do. So I'm going to attack first."

"Slowly," Bruce pleaded. "I warned him, but I still don't know how he's going to react to this."

"Fine." Clint bounced on the balls of his feet for a moment and let Bruce adopt a defensive position.
"You ready, pal?"

Bruce relaxed his stance and sighed. "Clint, please."

"What, you're too good for a nickname?" Clint shrugged. "Alright. That's fine. Show me what you've got, Banner."

Bruce looked like he was going to protest, but ultimately gritted his teeth and brought his arms up. In deference to his clear request, Clint attacked slowly, pausing after his initial blow.

"He's still quiet," Bruce said, bringing his arms up again. "Try again."

Clint obliged, aiming a pair of jabs at Bruce's torso that the scientist deflected easily. Clint catalogued that effortlessness and narrowed his eyes. "We good?"

"Yeah." Bruce grinned a little. "Yeah, I think so."

"Alright. Now hit me."

Bruce steadied himself. "Okay."

His attack was calculated and practiced, a form of martial arts that Clint had seen a time or two, with a force behind it that Clint had not expected from the mild-mannered scientist. Reacting accordingly, the archer upped his game, little by little, to test Bruce's limits.

Clint was achingly aware that their match had the attention of everyone in the room. Deflecting another incoming blow, he grasped Bruce's elbow and used the man's momentum to force him to turn. Locking his arm around Bruce's shoulder, Clint brought his other around to mimic a chokehold. The scientist struggled for a moment and Clint met Steve's eyes, waiting for a signal that Bruce was hulking out. Steve subtly shook his head and then his eyebrows shot into his hairline as Bruce slammed one elbow into Clint's gut and hooked his leg around Clint's, shoving them both backwards. Clint threw his arms out to brace himself and Bruce scrambled away.

Breathing heavily, Clint glared at the defensive scientist for a moment in disbelief. Narrowing his eyes, Clint finally held nothing back and flattened Bruce to the mat with a thud in a matter of minutes. The room went pin-drop silent, everyone staring in shock.

"What the fuck was that, Banner?"

Bruce put a hand to his head, groaning.

"Do not hulk out, Bruce," Tony yelled out. "We just finished building this."

"I'm not going to, damn it," Bruce swore uncharacteristically. "He's not even angry. He's laughing at me."

Bruce glanced up into Clint's harsh face, the archer's arms pitilessly crossed over his chest. "What the. fuck, man."

"You trained in martial arts, didn't you?" Maria interjected from across the room. "To help control your anger."

Clint whirled on her. "How did you know that?"

"I read his file," she replied casually. "You probably should have."
Clint growled at her in consternation and turned his scowl to Bruce. "Do you even need my help? Because it took Tasha a week to learn how to properly get out of that hold."

"Hey!"

He gave her a pointed look. "It did."

"Clint." The archer glared at Bruce, who sighed tiredly. "Look, I'm sorry. I should have told you that I'd trained before. But it's been a long time."

Clint stared at him for a few minutes, vaguely aware of Natasha and Thor settling into position to his right and Maria leading Tony and Steve to the large ring. Bruce continued to watch him pleadingly, and Clint finally sighed.

"Fine." He met Bruce's gaze seriously. "But no holding back this round. I need to see what you've got."

Bruce nodded. "Okay."

"Bruce!" Tony sounded much more excited than Bruce was expecting, and it was slightly worrisome. He closed the notebook he was writing in and pulled over a chair. "You are never going to believe this. I think I can recreate the Bifrost."

Bruce raised a brow at his friend, smiling lightly. "When did you become an expert on the geology of alien planets?"

"Last night," came the swift reply. Bruce's smile widened to a full-on, fondly exasperated grin.

"Tony, you've been locked in your lab for three days."

Tony faltered. "That's not that bad."

Bruce raised a brow at him and turned casually back to his notebook.

"Steve will fuss at you if you keep doing this," the scientist murmured. Tony scoffed aloud and Bruce suppressed a grin. "Pepper will fuss too."

"Not important right now," Tony said decisively, after a moment's pause. "Jane and I have been working the Bifrost housing and I think we have it down. Well, I've been working more than her, because she has to break to sleep."

"Tragedy," Bruce muttered, smiling slyly. "Did she tell you what the Bifrost actually was?"

"It's an Einstein-Rosen Bridge, better known as a wormhole."

Bruce stared at the manic billionaire. "And how are you going to create a concentrated wormhole on Earth?"

"Carefully," Tony replied swiftly. "I think that all we need is something with a negative energy density."

Bruce blinked at his friend. "Is that all?"

Tony rolled his eyes. "Honestly, Bruce I've only been working for three days, but your faith in me is flattering. Clearly it's something that we have to get from Thor, but I'm sure he'll know what I'm
talking about when I explain it to him."

"Explain what to me?"

"Exotic matter," Tony replied swiftly. "Is there anything on Asgard that has a negative energy density?"

Thor furrowed his brow in confusion. "A negative density?"

"Yes."

Thor thought for a moment and Bruce was impressed with the amount of restraint that Tony was showing in not interrogating the demi-god. "I believe that our Bifrost housing is comprised of what you seek. However, I am not certain. I shall investigate for you."

Tony waved a hand in his direction. "Go for it. I'll wait."

Thor narrowed his eyes at Tony. "Yes, you will. You have a prior engagement, as do I."

"What? Oh." Tony scowled at Thor as he realized what Thor meant. "You're here to escort me to training."

"Yes," the demi-god answered unapologetically. "Barton has stated that he is looking forward to your scheduled bout."

"Fantastic," Tony muttered.

Bruce grinned. "Best not keep him waiting."

"I'm still irritated that Spangles gave you a pass," Tony informed him. "That's not fair."

"Well, when you turn into an enormous green rage monster, then you can have a pass too," Bruce replied. "Go, before Thor drags you."

"You'll miss me," Tony retorted confidently as he strode out the door, Thor on his heels.

Bruce shook his head at the billionaire's self-assurance and returned to his notes. He had no idea how much time had passed, lost in his work, and he didn't resurface until footsteps pounded towards the labs. He raised his head as Clint skidded through the door, chest heaving with exertion.

"We had an accident in the training room and Tony's hurt."

Bruce immediately grabbed the obscenely well-prepared first aid kit from the end of his lab bench and followed Clint out to the training rooms, not bothering to ask any questions. Tony was leaning back against the wall in the sparring room, his face unnaturally pale, while Steve steadily kept pressure on the mass of towels draped over Tony's thigh. Natasha was crouched across from Steve, speaking lowly to Tony in a calming gesture. Thor stood nearby, uncharacteristically quiet.

"What happened?" They turned at Bruce's question and Clint's ears turned red.

"Tony was sparring with Clint and accidentally got pushed into the path of one of Natasha's throwing knives."

Bruce's eyebrows shot skyward when he heard Steve's explanation. "He got stabbed?"

Natasha and Clint flinched simultaneously.
"More like grazed," Tony ground out, desperately trying not to look down at the reddening pile of towels. Natasha shot him a sympathetic look and wiped some of the sweat from his forehead, oddly gentle.

"It was a misfortune," Thor reiterated.

Bruce had not moved. Steve finally turned from watching Tony to eye the scientist. "Doctor Banner?"

"He needs a doctor," Bruce stuttered.

Clint stared at him incredulously. "Which is why we called you," he said slowly, as if speaking to a child. "You are a doctor."

"PhD," Bruce replied, a little hysterical. "Not MD! They're extremely different!"

"You're all we've got, Bruce," Steve cut in, inexorable. "Calling the ambulance will take too long."

"I can't give him a blood transfusion," Bruce exclaimed. "Or, or, or get him an IV or meds or anything like that."

Clint was getting antsy, but Steve was insanely patient with the panicking Bruce. "I don't think he'll need anything major, but he does need stitches. You've done little things like that on your travels, haven't you?"

"Nothing that looks this dramatic," he commented shakily as Clint gently nudged him towards Tony.

"You know Tony," the archer joked. "He's queen of the drama queens."

"Stuff it, Barton," Tony exhaled heavily as Natasha silently slid back to make room for Bruce. "Or I'll fill your room with Mardi Gras beads."

"For the last time, idiot, Carnival and carnivals are not interchangeable."

Bruce tuned out the rest of the conversation as he began to focus on the wound that Steve cautiously revealed. It wasn't as bad as he had imagined, but it was a few inches long and several inches deep, and still leaking darkened blood on Tony's workout sweats. "What can I do?" Steve's whispered question caught his ear, but Bruce didn't look up.

'I'm going to need the antiseptic, for starters, and the needle and thread needs to be sterilized." Natasha materialized at his side and took the noted items out of the kit. Bruce pulled out his wallet and handed it to Tony.

"What do I do with this?" Bruce met Tony's confused gaze.

"You bite down on it."

Tony raised a brow, and the motion was so completely him that Bruce nearly forgot about the blood pooling on the floor. "Kinky, but I'm not into that."

Steve rolled his eyes. "It's to help with the pain."

"Whatever you say, Stars and Stripes." He pointed a wavering finger at Bruce. "My safe word is banana."

Natasha brought the sterilized items back, setting them on the alcohol wipe Bruce had laid out. She
smirked a bit when she tucked a bottle of codeine pills into Tony's hand. Bruce could hear Thor asking Clint what a safe word was, but he ignored the archer's choked reply. Threading the needle, he warned, "This is going to hurt, Tony."

Tony, for his part, maintained his bravado as he palmed a couple of pills. "That's what all the websites tell me."

Bruce shook his head and his vision narrowed to the wound in front of him. He tried to block out Tony's whimpers, counting on Steve to handle the billionaire while he worked. It seemed like an eternity before he finished and tied off the thread. Taping a bandage in place over the fresh row of stitches, he finally began registering sounds again.

" - and I said my safe word fifty times and you kept going."

"It was not fifty times," Natasha interjected, exasperatedly.

Tony glared. "I counted." She crossed her arms, presumably to keep from punching the injured man, and Tony continued. "You're going to med school."

Bruce blinked in bemusement. "What?"

"Med school. You. Now. Because someone needs to be able to patch us up better than their standard war zone trauma surgeries," Tony explained, waving a hand at the others. "My face is a delicate thing and I need a careful someone to look out for it."

Clint cocked his head. "Are you planning on getting your face torn up?"

"You never know," Tony sniffed.

Bruce raised a placating hand. "The Other Guy isn't really a fan of classrooms," he murmured. "Or labs."

"You can just watch Grey's Anatomy," Clint piped up unhelpfully, and Tony snickered despite himself.

"I'm sure that would be extremely informative," Bruce replied dryly. "But no."

"Can we compromise with online classes?" Bruce looked at Steve, vacillating between being impressed at his suggestion and despaired that Steve was taking the other side of the argument. "More than likely, you'll have plenty of opportunities to practice on us, and you're already pretty good with your hands."

Tony smiled wickedly, the painkillers clearly kicking in. "Know that for a fact, do you, Uncle Sam?"

Steve heaved a sigh and, in one fluid motion, ripped the packaging off a large square bandage and slapped it over Tony's mouth. The billionaire glared at him with loopy eyes, but Steve avoided his gaze. Clint doubled over with laughter, and even Bruce cracked a smile.

"I won't order it," Steve continued. "But your help would be appreciated."

Bruce glanced back down at Tony, who was feebly picking at the edge of the square over his mouth as the drugs took effect. Tony looked up at him, and a silent exchange passed. Bruce sighed.

"Okay."
To be continued in Chapter Twelve.
"You must remember, family is often born of blood, but it doesn't depend on blood. Nor is it exclusive of friendship. Family members can be your best friends, you know. And best friends, whether or not they are related to you, can be your family."

— Trenton Lee Stewart, The Mysterious Benedict Society

... 

"The most important thing in life is your family. There are days you love them, and others you don't, but in the end they're the people you always come home to. Sometimes it's the family you're born into, and sometimes it's the one you make for yourself."

— Candice Bergen, Sex and the City

Chapter Twelve

This is such a bad idea, Steve thought to himself as he made his way to Tony's lab. Trying to teach himself history was one thing. It was easy to flip through textbook after textbook and read until he remembered things that he'd never experienced. Trying to teach himself the physics behind his shield was something completely different.

Damn Thor, he thought without malice.

He couldn't really blame the demi-god, he supposed. Thor was only being curious while they trained, wanting to know exactly how Steve managed to throw his shield with the perfect velocity and trajectory each time. The problem came when Steve realized that he had absolutely no idea; he just threw it and it worked. His explanation had satisfied Thor, but not himself, and after a week of dithering, he came to the only course of action he could think of.

Taking a deep breath, Steve knocked on the door to the lab.

"Mr. Stark is currently beneath the roadster, Captain Rogers," JARVIS announced, unlocking the door.

"Hey Cap." Tony's shout was muffled by the chassis he was currently underneath. Rolling out, he sat up and rubbed at an oil smudge on his cheek. "What's up? Have you changed my five day rule to a three day rule and forgotten to tell me?"

"No." Steve shifted, uncomfortable. "How is your leg?"

Tony glanced down at the bulge beneath his pants leg, where white gauze wrapped his accidental knife wound. "Serviceable. Did you need something?"

Steve nodded to himself, and suddenly blurted out, "I don't know how my shield works."

The billionaire blinked at him. "What?"

"Thor asked me how I was able to throw my shield perfectly every time, and I couldn't tell him," Steve confessed, averting his gaze. "The reason is some kind of physics, I know, but I don't know it. And I need to."
Tony remained silent, his eyes unreadable and trained on Steve. The silence stretched and lengthened in the lab.

"You want me to teach you physics?"

Steve's knee jerk reaction was to say "No" as loudly and forcefully as possible, but he bit his tongue. "Not," he responded, slowly. "If it's too much trouble."

"It wouldn't be trouble," Tony said gently. Steve looked up at the soft tone of his voice. Tony was leaning forward, his elbows resting lightly on his knees, with the kindest expression on his face that Steve had ever seen. "It wouldn't be trouble," Tony reiterated when Steve did not reply. "Steve."

"What?" Steve sighed.

"I can help you with this." Tony was quietly earnest and Steve visibly wavered. "Let me help you with this."

"Okay."

Holding out a hand, Steve helped Tony up from the ground and followed the billionaire back to his workbench. Forgoing the desktop, he reached into the cabinet and ruffled around, finally emerging with a battered old physics book.

"I didn't take you for the nostalgic type," Steve murmured.

"I'm not," Tony replied. "I took over the company right out of college, and I never got around to getting rid of them."

Handing the book to Steve, he dropped into his chair and pointed at the couch. "Start with classical physics. You have to have that basis if we're going to get into the properties of vibranium. Read through it and ask me if you have any questions."

Settling himself on the couch at Tony's right, Steve gingerly opened the old book and began reading while Tony worked on various project plans on his desk top. When he reached something that he needed help understanding, Steve would ask Tony, intently listening to the billionaire's surprisingly simple explanations.

The lessons continued for days, Steve carving out bits of time to sit on the couch in Tony's lab. He brought in other books, for history and math and the sciences to simply have a quiet place to work. Tony instructed him to read each chapter carefully and then work through the example problems, handing him a calculator and delving into his own projects.

Steve painstakingly waded through the questions, writing out each step on paper and doing most of the math by hand, as he was used to. When he couldn't complete a problem in, what Tony had dubbed, "his way", he turned to the rather extensive calculator. He figured out most of the functions on the handheld device simply by logic, but was soon stymied by the myriad of commands on the small computer in his hands.

"I give up."

Tony looked up from his work and stared at Steve for a long moment.

"That's not a Captain thing to say," he finally commented. Steve looked uncharacteristically defeated as he dropped his head into his hands.
"I don't care," the soldier retorted, his voice muffled by his palms. "I'm done."

Tony resisted the urge to roll his eyes and stopped for a moment to reason out what had the soldier so out of sorts. He glanced at the multitude of open textbooks surrounding Steve and the calculator sitting innocently atop the looseleaf papers and, suddenly, he knew.

"It's not because you're stupid, Steve." Tony scooted closer and tapped Steve's leg to gain his attention. He waited until the soldier raised his eyes, and then he looked at Steve seriously. "The advancements that have been made in the last seventy years are so massive and numerous that trying to learn them all at once is the single most difficult thing anyone would ever have to do. Even I couldn't manage it."

Steve glanced wryly at Tony. "Yes you could."

"Yes, I could," Tony agreed, leaning back. "But, I was trying to make you feel better. Did it work?"

Steve laughed. "A little, yeah."

Tony's eyes crinkled slightly as he nudged the calculator closer to Steve. "Try again."

The beeping was incessant, a shrill noise that echoed every three seconds, and Maria was at her wit's end. Finally pulling her headboard away from the wall, she found a charger plugged into the electrical outlet and followed the cord to Phil's cellphone. Cursing the sentimentality that had prompted her to keep the phone on and charged, she snatched it up from where it had fallen to the floor.

She keyed up the main screen and rubbed the sleep from her eyes, blearily reading, "Anniversary." Blinking incomprehensively at the screen, she sighed and dismissed the message. She placed the phone on her bedside table and climbed back into bed.

Five minutes later, the beeping began again and she hurtled out of bed. The screen read, "ANNIVERSARY. PRESENT IN DESK DRAWER" and she glared angrily at it. Stalking from her room, she barged into Clint's.

The archer was on his stomach, his face planted firmly in the pillows. The covers were twisted around his hips, revealing broad, scarred shoulders. One arm dangled listlessly off the mattress and he let out a quiet snore. She closed the door and picked her way across the piles of clothes on his floor to the bedside table. Placing Phil's phone on top, she moved it to the other side of the room and flicked the lamp on.

Clint slumbered on and she sighed. Returning to the bedside, she hooked both hands around his wrist and pulled. He dropped to the floor like dead weight, jolting awake with the impact. Maria held the phone out as he rubbed ineffectually at his eyes.

"What the hell is this?"

He looked groggily up at her. "What the hell is this? I was fucking asleep."

"So was I," she retorted. "Until Phil's damned phone decided that three in the morning was a great time to alert me."

He stared at her. "Why in the name of fuck do you have Phil's phone?"

"Because I'm sentimental like that," she snapped. "What anniversary?"
Shifting so that he was comfortably leaning against the bed, Clint reached up a hand for the phone. She handed it over with aplomb, waiting as he inspected it. "I don't know," he finally muttered, rubbing at his eyes. "Mine?"

Everything clicked with perfect clarity. "Oh dear God, your anniversary is coming up."

"Generally does once a year," he said, tipping his head back to rest on the mattress.

She glared at him, prying the phone from his lax grip. "So what are you planning to do?"

"Go back to bed."

"For your anniversary," she clarified through gritted teeth, repressing the urge to punch Clint.

He shrugged. "Phil handled it. The presents, I mean. We never really did anything fancy."

"Of course not," she murmured, reading the notification again. "Do you think it's your present or Natasha's?"

"Fuck if I know," Clint groaned. "Can I go back to bed?"

"No." She tucked one leg behind the other and dropped gracefully to a seated position in front of him. "Where are the contents of his office?"

Clint sighed, finally seeing that she wasn't going to relent and let him go back to sleep. "At the ranch."

"When can you leave?"

"Not fucking now." He stared at her. "Are you serious?"

She raised an eyebrow at him, the motion more questioning than sardonic. "Would Phil let you go back to bed, or would he send you out to the ranch?"

Clint averted his gaze, pressing his lips together. She hummed softly. "I'll give you another couple of hours to sleep, but be on the road by sunrise."

"Give me a day to sell it to Tash," he wheedled. She rolled her eyes at him and he continued. "She's going to want to know why I'm leaving. Honestly, they all will. So, what are you going to tell the others?"

"That I needed a few of Phil's old files and I asked you to get them for me," she replied easily. "It's believable."

He nodded in agreement. "They'll buy it. But Tasha will know what's going on when she realizes it's almost our anniversary."

Maria snorted. "She's just as bad as you in that regard, so I doubt she will."

"Your bed sucks."

Natasha sighed at the whispered declaration, annoyed at both the slight accusation and the fact that Clint had woken her up to tell her. "We've discussed this," she mumbled into her pillow.

"There is nothing wrong with my bed," he told her, propping himself up on his elbow. "Why can't
"Because it smells like a gym locker," she replied, shifting to her back. She pushed the hair from her face. "Why am I not asleep?"

"Because your bed sucks?"

She groaned. "Barton, I will kill you."

He snorted, wrapping one arm around her waist and tugging her closer. "You've been threatening that for years. If you were going to, you'd have done it already."

"I'm getting soft," she muttered, not protesting when he slipped his leg in between hers and pressed his lips to her skin. "I should work on that."

"I'm getting soft too," he murmured suggestively. "You should work on that."

"Idiot."

Clint nudged his hips into her thigh when she closed her eyes again. "Come on."

"No," she retorted flatly. "You should know by now that you don't get sex if you wake me up in the middle of the night."

"It's not technically the middle of the night," he hedged, reaching over her to adjust the clock and read it. "It's almost morning."

"Then you should get going." Shoving at his shoulders, she slid out of bed, to his audible protest. "Maria needs those files and I have new knives to test."

Clint gaped at her. "You're joking, right?"

She restrained a smile, arching a brow at him as she dipped into her closet for a fresh pair of underwear. "Of course not. Tony made a hollowed out handle that stores poison. It's released when pressure is applied to the blade."

"New toys are not a good enough reason to not have sex with me," he argued, throwing the coverlet to the side and half rising out of bed. When she continued to dress, his eyes narrowed. "Tasha."

She stepped back to the bed, pressing his wrists into the mattress and a kiss to his lips. "Go."

"Fine." He rolled his eyes. "It's almost like you want me gone."

"Concerned?" She smirked at him, darting away before he could pull her back down onto the mattress. "Maybe you should be."

Clint snorted, rolling out of bed faster than she expected and snagging one arm around her waist. "You'd miss me."

Dropping a kiss on her shoulder, he released her to get dressed.

News of Clint's departure was met with causal indifference from the rest of the team. Tony and Bruce were too deep into their Bifrost research to truly care that Clint was going to be absent for a few days. Natasha was ambivalent, accepting that Maria needed the files and Clint had a better chance of finding them than either of the two women. Pepper was in New York for a series of
meetings, and Thor had been introduced to the realm of Lord of the Rings and bad eighties action
flicks. Steve was slightly more concerned with Clint's solo trip, but was ultimately reassured, and
Clint left without incident.

The ranch was quiet and looking a little more dilapidated than he remembered as he drove up to the
door. Throwing the truck into park, he hopped out, dragging his small duffel with him. Reaching into
his pocket for the key, he froze at its absence.

"Fuck," he muttered to himself, pulling his lockpicks from the duffel.

The door swung open after a minute and he stepped inside. A fine layer of dust kicked up as he
strode through the entryway and up to the second floor. Everything had been shipped to a
nondescript post office box in the neighboring state and they'd hauled it to the house themselves,
stashing the plain, cardboard boxes in one of the old bedrooms.

Shoving the door open, he sighed at the abundance of containers and entered. His and Natasha's
things were haphazardly labeled and stored mostly in the front of the room, so Clint picked his way
to the back. Maria had clearly marked the boxes from Phil's office, the tags written with precision
and detail.

Rooting through the cartons, he finally found the contents of Phil's desk. He hauled the container out
to the hallway and dumped the contents onto the floor. Dropping to his haunches, he began rooting
through the items.

He found it after a few minutes of searching. It was a small wooden box, held closed with a
gleaming brass catch, sitting inconspicuously beside a bag of paperclips. Picking it up, Clint pried the
top off and dumped out his prize.

"Fuck," he whispered, blinking rapidly as he fingered the item in his palm.

He grinned involuntarily, rubbing a hand across his mouth. Shaking his head as he rose, he curled his
fingers into a loose fist and whispered, "Phil, you son of a bitch."

Her door was locked.

Natasha stared at the knob disbelievingly, wondering how her room had been locked, with her
lockpicks inside, when there was a noise from the end of the hall. She whirled, glaring at Clint's
door. Shoving it open, she arched brow at the sight of him perched on his bed.

"I see you're finally back."

He grinned at her, tossing a small box in her direction.

"Happy anniversary, zhena."

Turning her back to him, she flicked loose the catch on the box and cracked open the lid.

"Oh," she breathed involuntarily. With her hand trembling, she gently nudged the misshapen lump of
lead. Swallowing thickly, she lifted the necklace from the velvet.

"Do you know," she murmured as Clint rose from the bed and moved behind her. "How long I spent
staring at this, wondering whose rifle it came from, and whether or not it was meant to miss?"

"Of course it was meant to miss you." Clint ignored her question, reaching over her shoulder to take
the chain from her grasp. She lifted her hair and he clasped the necklace around her neck. He placed a soft kiss to the exposed skin, letting his lips linger. "I was aiming at the brick, and I always hit what I aim at."

Despite herself, she grinned, fingering the necklace that rested on her shirt. "Was the brick lethal? Was it plotting to stab me in the back?"

He smiled against her spine. "Bricks can be very shifty. Can't trust the clay bastards."

She smiled. Picking up the bullet pendant, she dropped it beneath her shirt to rest against her sternum. Her eyes took on a distant look as she remembered. "I'd kept it for analysis, in the beginning, to try and track you as best I could. After I defected, I kept it anyway."

"For sentimental reasons, right? Because you were falling in love with me?" He laughed when she punched him.

"No. You were irritating and loud and you never shut up, but that bullet had become a-," she grappled for the right word. "An obsession," she decided finally.

He nodded, understanding perfectly. "Am I still an obsession?"

Smiling, she kissed him gently.

"No."

"So where's my present?" he asked, glancing pointedly at her shirt with a leer.

Rolling her eyes at him, she pulled out of his embrace and dipped into his bag for his lockpicks. She arched a brow at him as slipped out of the door. He made to follow her, but she pressed a palm to his chest, retreating to her room. Stepping over to his bed, Clint fell back and closed his eyes.

He opened them when something landed on his abdomen with a quiet slap. Bringing a hand up to catch the object, he froze when his fingers met with thick cardstock, soft with age. Curling his body upwards, he glanced down at his hand with incredulity.

Captain America's jaunty salute was marred by the browning bloodstain and Clint swallowed back a sudden rush of tears as he traced the edges of the mark.

"Steve took them, after." He faintly registered Natasha's hushed voice. "He carried them in his belt during the battle, and he gave them back to me when we settled onto the helicarrier. He said he didn't feel right keeping them, but that he wasn't sure you were ready to have them."

Clint brought his gaze to hers, unashamed of the tears that dripped down his cheeks and into his lap. Her eyes smiled gently at him. "I think you are now."

"What is that?"

Natasha paused with her fork halfway to her lips, staring at Tony. "What is what?"

He pointed dangerously close to her chest, indicating the chain that disappeared beneath her shirt collar and prompting Bruce to raise an eyebrow at his audacity. "That. The sparkly thing around your neck."

She blinked slowly at him. "A necklace. I thought you were part of MENSA."
"You don't wear jewelry," he said bluntly, ignoring her sarcastic quip. "So what's so special about that?"

"I wear jewelry," she muttered, frowning.

He snorted, turning back to his tablet. "No, you don't. What's with the necklace?"

"I gave it to her," Clint answered, swaggering into the kitchen with a grin and dropping into the chair beside Natasha. "She's sentimental like that."

"Clearly," Bruce murmured dryly, his lips quirked. Natasha shot him a glare as Clint shifted to face Bruce more fully. "You're very chipper this morning."

Clint grinned. "I had a good night."

"I do not need to know that," the scientist replied, dropping his gaze to his notebook.

"Me either," Tony sniped. "Is anyone going to tell me what it is? I've been asking for ten minutes."

Bruce rolled his eyes. "Ten seconds, more likely." To Clint, he added, "Are you sure that you want to do this? She's looking kind of lethal."

"She always looks like that," Clint dismissed. "It's her training."

Natasha muttered something in another language as Maria stepped into the kitchen. "What did Clint do this time?" she asked, smiling lightly. "You only ever curse in Russian when he's really irritated you."

"I'm telling them about her feminine side," Clint informed her.

Maria snorted a laugh. "At your own risk."

"I would like to point out that I still don't know what the big deal is about this necklace is," Tony announced loudly. "And if it's going to annoy Red, then I want to."

Leaning over, Clint curled his finger beneath the chain around her neck and tugged it upwards to expose the mangled bullet on the end. Maria hid a smile behind her hand as Bruce and Tony leaned forward.

"What is that?"

"It looks like a bullet," Bruce said to Tony in answer.

"It is," Maria said laughingly. "Is that the same one you dug out of the wall?"

"Yes," Natasha muttered grudgingly.

Maria's smile gentled as she met Clint's eyes. "I see," she murmured.

Bruce cocked his head curiously at her while Tony grinned slowly. "Why, Red, could Clint be right?"

"I am often right, actually," Clint put in. Natasha glared mutinously at him and he rolled his eyes. "It's an anniversary present."

"Which year?" Clint stared at Steve, who was watching the proceedings with barely restrained
amusement. "How many years have you been married?"

"I'm more concerned with why the present is bullet jewelry," Bruce said hesitantly.

"It's the first bullet he ever shot at her," Maria explained.

Bruce's brows disappeared into his hairline. "At her?"

Maria nodded. "He was giving her a warning shot. She went back later and retrieved the bullet to try and find him."

"That is so fucked up," Tony muttered, pouring himself some more coffee.

"That's them," Maria replied, as if it explained everything. "So, Clint, how many?"

Clint remained silent, avoiding eye contact. Natasha shifted. "Three? I think it's three."

"Maybe it's four," Clint mumbled, one finger tracing out profanities on the table.

"You don't know what year you got married," Steve said disbelievingly. "Really?"

Natasha shrugged. "We're married. What does the date matter?"

Tony leaned forward suddenly, intent. "You said date."

The redhead arched a brow at him. "So?"

"Date implied month, day, year. Have you forgotten one, two, or all of those numbers?"

"You'd have to have prior knowledge in order to forget," Clint quipped, oblivious to the incredulous glances the scientists were giving each other. Maria's body shook with the force it took to restrain her peals of laughter. After a moment, Tony turned back to the assassins.

"I'm sorry," he began.

Natasha snorted. "No you're not."

"That is not the point," he insisted. "Are you telling me that you don't know when you got married?"

"I am telling you that we have no idea what date Phil put on the license," she corrected. "Part of our cover was supposed to be this cutesy argument as to the actual date, and we've both forgotten which was the right one."

"And what month it was in," Clint muttered.

"You got married for a mission?" Steve clarified dubiously.

Maria shook her head. "They were supposed to pretend as part of their cover. Phil, on the other hand, decided that he was sick of the two of them dancing around each other and got a legally binding license for them to sign, and then filed it afterwards."

Steve, Tony, and Bruce stared at her in disbelief, and had not moved when Thor joined them. The demi-god arched a brow at the scene in the kitchen. "I feel as though I have missed something important."

"It's complicated," Steve managed.
"What's complicated?" Pepper asked as she breezed into the kitchen, plucking Tony's coffee from his hands. "I'm running late, so tell me fast."

"Phil filed our marriage license without telling us what date he put, so we don't know when our anniversary is," Clint announced peevishly.

Pepper stared at him. "Is it soon?" she asked after a moment, in a perfectly calm tone.

"Yes," Maria answered for them.

"So what are you going to do to celebrate?" Pepper demanded.

"Uh, nothing?" She narrowed her eyes at Clint's response as the others exchanged pointed looks.

"No," she said decisively. "If you don't want a big party, then that's fine. But we are having a nice dinner of your choosing tonight, whether you like it or not. Together."

"Yes, ma'am," Clint muttered, smiling innocently at her when she glared at him. He turned to Steve. "I'll get you the recipe before I head out to the range."

Steve raised an eyebrow at him. "You're not going to stay and make sure I get it right?"

"Like I'd know if you were fucking up," Clint retorted with a snort of laughter. He rose, draining his cup of coffee. "I'll be right back."

The archer darted up the stairs, leaving Natasha to answer any further questions. He returned after a few minutes with a handwritten recipe scrawled on half a sheet of paper. Steve took the offered instructions and raised a brow.

"Are you sure this is it?"

"Are you sure this is edible?" Thor muttered, eyeing the recipe over Steve's shoulder.

Clint rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I'm sure. Just trust me."

"If you insist," Thor murmured dubiously as Clint returned upstairs.

Natasha watched him go for a moment, absently listening to the discussion for the evening's plans, the group dispersed as breakfast ended and Natasha found herself on the receiving end of an understand glance. Turning, she met Maria's gaze. The older agent smiled.

"Shut up," Natasha muttered, pushing away from the table and leaving the kitchen.

"But you didn't say anything," she heard Steve say to Maria as she ascended the stairs. She missed Maria's reply, stepping into the hallway, and quickly snuck down to Clint's room.

He was standing by his bed, the sheets in a tangled mess and lying half on the floor. His bow case was open on the mattress, the bow itself shining softly in the morning sunlight. She peeked through the door as he ran his palm along the curve.

"You can come in, you know," he murmured wryly into the silence.

Hugging her arms closer to herself, she entered the room, quietly closing the door behind her. Moving to his side, she joined him in his contemplation of his weapon.

"It won't change anything," he said after a few long minutes. "If I don't use it again."
"You'll change," she rejoined. "And Ben will be so disappointed in you."

"Phil would kick my ass," he offered, a hint of amusement threading through his tone. Reaching into the case, his palm fitted around the bow and he pulled it from its velvet bed. "And a Glock would never feel right."

"And think of all the arrows that Tony would have to repurpose." He laughed lowly, extending his right arm and pulling back on the string with two fingers. "It doesn't mean anything, you know."

"Still a broken soldier," he reminded her softly. Phil's image rose in his mind unbidden, and he was surprised to find that the team joined it. "But maybe a little less broken now."

The kitchen was filled to the brim as preparations for Clint and Natasha's anniversary dinner were underway. There were two casserole dishes in the oven, some concoction that had no name, but Clint insisted was "the best fucking thing ever," and beers were making the rounds. Clint was perched on the countertop next to the stove, his bare feet dangling. Tony leaned next to him, occasionally swatting at the foot that kicked his way.

"I can't believe you're actually doing a crossword puzzle at the table, Bruce," the billionaire loudly proclaimed. "It's a celebration and everything."

Bruce gave Tony an arch look over the top of his glasses as Pepper pressed a cold beer into Clint's hands with a smile. "Pepper just gave Clint alcohol. I highly doubt he cares about my crossword. I'm sure Natasha doesn't."

"I wouldn't, if you could move out of the way," Natasha sniped with a small smile. She edged a plate beneath his arm. "That newspaper is taking up far too much space."

"Agreed," Tony put in immediately. "And it smells weird."

"I believe that is the meal that Barton has requested for tonight," Thor teased as he followed Natasha with handfuls of cutlery, grinning. "I am not certain that is actually edible."

"It's not like I made it," Clint grumbled. "I gave Cap the recipe."

"That might be his point," Steve murmured, shooing everyone away from the oven. "Come on, sit down. I don't want to burn anyone."

Tony watched him idly for a moment, a suspicious gleam in his eyes.

"You know," the billionaire began leadingly, "There was really only one topic that I remember that could make my dad laugh the hardest."

"That was a strange segue way," Natasha muttered as she ducked beneath the steaming casserole dishes to sneak a sip of Clint's beer. Tony shot her a look and she rolled her eyes. "But I guess it doesn't matter."

The archer frowned as she stole his bottle, but allowed the petty theft, instead raising an eyebrow at Tony. "Your dad didn't laugh?"

"Not like this," Tony replied, his lips curving in a grin. "Want to know why, Spangles?"

Steve wiggled his fingers at Thor for a beer, shooting Tony a teasing glance as he took a sip. "I'm sure you're going to tell me anyway."
"Well yeah, but you have to ask," the billionaire whined. Pepper and Natasha protested loudly to his tone, their noise covered the almost imperceptible sound of the gravel drive crunching beneath car tires and the low growl of an engine turning off.

The soldier rolled his eyes, fondly exasperated. "Why?"

"Actor Wallach, three letters," Bruce interrupted, pausing his crossword to pull his sweater off. Setting it to the side, he didn't react when Natasha picked it up immediately and drew it over her head. Pepper took a place near the end of the table and peeked over Bruce's shoulder.

Clint turned suddenly and answered, "Eli," returning his attention to Tony as Pepper pointed out another solution to the scientist.

"Dad always laughed the hardest when someone talked about getting fondue." The room went silent as Steve paused, his face coloring a burnished red. Tony crowed triumphantly. "Any idea why?"

"Shut up, Tony," the soldier muttered, the tips of his ears darkening with embarrassment.

"Hey Iron Ass," Clint put in casually, clearly taking pity on the mortified soldier. Bruce snorted a laugh as Tony turned his attention, sparing a glower for Bruce as Clint continued, "I saw the new designs for your house in Malibu. Compensating for something?"

Tony leveled a glare at the archer and the two began an easy banter that Thor watched with amusement. Shaking off his embarrassment, Steve opened a drawer and emerged with a handful of forks, dipping them one at a time into the casserole and doling out tastes to the increasingly noisy team. The exclamations of appreciation were loud enough to cover the soft latch of the unlocked front door closing.

"Okay, I admit it," Pepper said with a laugh. "This is the most amazing thing I've ever eaten."

Natasha raised an eyebrow at her. "What about that chocolate mousse we had in Monaco?"

Thor shook his head, interjecting. "You cannot judge sweet and savory on the same scale. Jane Foster has taught me this."

"Jane Foster is a very smart lady," Pepper told him as they shared a smile.

"I don't think it's that amazing," Tony announced, contemplating his empty fork. "One time in college, I had a g-,

"Do not finish that sentence," Pepper warned him.

He blinked innocently at her as Clint erupted into laughter. "I was going to say a great lasagna but whatever."

"I'll bet you were," Natasha muttered, rising to retrieve another beer. Steve handed her the bottle opener with a pointed look and turned at a strangled noise from the direction of the staircase.

Maria stood on the last step, her body unnaturally frozen and her face pale. The soldier frowned, walking towards her as Bruce leaned back in his chair, his brow furrowed. "What's a six letter word for someone or something of a same or similar kind?"

"Maria? Are you okay?" Steve asked lowly, trying not to cause unnecessary worry for those still in the kitchen that were offering suggestions to help Bruce finish his puzzle. She made no move, and he turned to follow her gaze.
"Fuck."

The sound of the harsh curse falling from Steve's lips gave everyone pause. Attention was collectively riveted to the pair at the staircase first, and then to the person that was standing in the shadows at the edge of the foyer.

Phil Coulson smiled gently as he stepped forward. "I believe that word that you're looking for, Doctor Banner, is family."

Fin.

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